Studying political disputes: A rhetorical perspective and a case study

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Abstract
This article argues that rhetorical analysis is a method particularly well-suited for the study of political disputes and introduces commonplaces as a tool to conduct such analysis. Commonplaces function as key reference points that produce and organise social meaning; they can thus help to clarify the terms of the dispute and illuminate how these are linked to broader debates within the political community. Commonplaces call into attention sedimented views and point to alternative norms of action pursued by agents of change and therefore to entry points for recontestation. The article substantiates this claim through a case study that maps arguments for climate action in party manifestos in the 2019 General Election in the United Kingdom. A rhetorical analysis of the material highlights the emergence of a number of insurgent commonplaces that seek to disturb the dominance of ‘economic growth’ as principle that informs climate action. Commonplaces can provide a more nuanced understanding of public debates, help to identify sedimented ideological views, and illuminate openings for recontestation and the pursuit of alternative socio-ecological arrangements.

Keywords
climate change, commonplaces, political dispute, rhetorical analysis

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Introduction
Dispute is a key marker of politics as a domain of action. From Aristotle to Arendt and from Machiavelli to Mouffe, political thinkers acknowledge the irreducibly conflictual nature of politics. The omnipresence of dispute is the result not only of the pluralism of interests and values that characterise political communities, but also of the instability of core political ideas such as justice and equality. Political dispute takes the form of antagonistic claims that are created and articulated around symbols that people can understand and identify with; disputes are constituted through rhetoric, namely discursive interventions that address specific audiences for a definitive purpose, that of inducing cooperation...
This article takes up this argument and shows how the method of rhetorical analysis is particularly pertinent to the study of political disputes. To substantiate this claim, I draw on the controversy over how best to address the phenomenon of climate change. The political nature of this controversy is the result of the way climate change threatens common goods, from global commons (e.g. the air, oceans, forests, etc.) to things that people value (their freedom, ways of living, etc.). The process of understanding and deciding the kind of changes needed to address this threat is a collective one: it requires collective deliberation, formation of judgement, and decision-making. These are tasks that involve rhetoric.

Whereas climate change is a physical phenomenon, in the sense that it takes place in the realm of physical reality, the interpretation of its importance as well as the dispute over how best to respond to its implications, is a political matter. Although the analysis offered here aspires to understand change by attending to the agent/structure complex in a way similar to constructivism (Pettenger, 2007), it focuses on how the physical reality of a changed climate becomes the *topos* of political dispute for agents of antagonistic socio-ecological visions. By taking up this particular perspective, the rhetorical approach proposed in this article does not overlook the role of humans in the creation of the conditions that resulted to the change of the earth system; this is accepted as an unquestioned fact. Rather, the aim is to scrutinise how the acceptance of this fact as a starting point of reasoning, deliberation, and socio-economic organisation can lead to very different, indeed conflicting views about present and future collective climate action.

This aim excludes from the discussion the perspective of outright climate change denialism, which surely expresses the belief of certain individuals and groups yet remains relatively marginal on the level of governance and executive decision-making in the UK context where the case study is drawn from. Denialism is not considered in this analysis for three further reasons. As explained in the following section, political dispute requires a commonly accepted starting point; the formation of political judgement is informed by what Arendt (1993) calls factual and rational truth without which the public realm is open to ‘alternative facts’ and ‘organised lying’. Furthermore, although denialism can be a relatively easy target of blame for inaction and lack of progress, historically, it is the inaction of political elites that accept the reality of climate science and find recourse to market mechanisms and ‘green growth’ that enabled the staggering increase of carbon dioxide emissions in the last 30 years. Finally, my analysis does not attend to epistemological disputes about scientific theories, methods, or knowledge production; rather, my focus is on the role of ideas in shaping this dispute, giving it public resonance, and inviting responses and action.

The article starts with a discussion of the dual relation between rhetoric and political dispute: the latter is constituted through the former, but it can also be studied using tools from the rhetorical canon. Rhetorical analysis differs from other approaches to the study of political discourse, in that it is concerned with the situated forms that discourse takes as a series of arguments within a particular context. The article illustrates this through the example of party discourse on climate action in the United Kingdom. It then proceeds to show how and why commonplaces can be used effectively to analyse the constitutive elements of the dispute on how to act in view of unprecedented anthropogenic climate changes. The analysis of five party manifestos in the 2019 UK General Election shows that whereas some parties appealed to the dominant commonplace ‘economic growth’ to argue for climate action, others put forward insurgent commonplaces that disrupt the seemingly natural primacy of economic growth. The broader argument of the article is
that commonplaces can provide a more nuanced understanding of public debates, help to identify sedimented ideological commitments, and point to openings for recontestation and the pursuit of alternative socio-ecological arrangements.

**Rhetoric and political disputes**

Political disputes are rhetoric’s natural territory. For Ancient Greeks, who were the first who studied and codified rhetoric in the Western tradition, rhetoric was the primary means of collective deliberation and judgement formation on communal affairs. Given the lack of certainty and absolute control over these matters, propositions communicated through oratorical interventions in the public realm were instrumental in helping the members of the polis to form collective decisions. The contingent and uncertain character of political affairs entailed that disputes could emerge over how to proceed; rhetoric was the way to negotiate tensions and reach agreement. Although the conditions in contemporary liberal democracies are very different, uncertainty and contingency still characterise political life; and although not all politics is oppositional, the pluralistic nature of political communities inevitably leads to disputation. On such instances of controversy, debate and deliberation aim at the formation of judgement and the establishment of temporary agreements that enable collective decision-making and the pursuit of common goods. In summary, rhetoric functions both constitutively and instrumentally: it constitutes the dispute and becomes the tool for its articulation. Whereas, the latter function of rhetoric enables its agent to convey an instrumental purpose, the former shapes, orients, and negotiates meaning, values, and relationships, inviting and fostering particular responses, feelings, and ways of acting (Pezzulo and Cox, 2018: 34–35).

A political dispute emerges when relationships between political agents or actors are characterised by disagreement. Disagreement is a kind of speech situation that differs from misunderstanding and misconstruction. As Rancière (1995: x) explains, disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness.

Political disagreement requires the acceptance of a common denominator or starting point (e.g. ‘climate change is happening, we must act on it’). At stake in disagreement is not just words but also material aspects of the statement, proposition, or idea that causes the dispute, as well as the acceptance, or lack thereof, of the authority or capacity of those involved in the dispute.

As a form of rhetorical engagement, a dispute ‘critiques, resituates, and develops communication practices bridging the public and personal spheres’ (Olson and Goodnight, 1994: 249). A political dispute is presented and formulated through particular terms that are meaningful in the context of a specific community and that are arranged in the way deemed most effective to make an impact upon an audience within a given occasion. As Hauser (1986: 10) puts it, rhetoric ‘constructs situational truths that give meaning to social behaviour’ and by doing so it ‘can frame a world of moral actions and consequences for its audience’. In this sense, rhetoric is a form of constitutive action: it shapes how ideas are circulated in the public realm. One needs to be cautious with regard to this function of rhetoric, though. The fact that rhetoric can be used to create shared
understanding on a particular issue by ordering meaning in a certain way does not entail that this issue does not happen outside rhetoric; rather, it entails that the social and political meaning of this issue is defined by the choice of terms used to articulate it and make it graspable and meaningful for the members of a given community.

Political disputes are constituted through the form of rhetoric that can be called disputatious (Hatzisavvidou, 2017). This form manifests itself in instances when the subject of confrontation is diametrically opposed views on how to proceed on a political issue, and therefore when confrontation calls for a form of rhetoric ‘shaped by a strongly competitive purpose’ (Burke, 1969: 60). Unlike other forms of confrontational rhetoric, disputatious rhetoric is political in that propositions or their agents are not dismissed on the basis of not complying with moral codes, but because they articulate and pursue worldviews that prioritise radically different political principles and goals. Political disputes concern the negotiation of competing understandings with regard to distribution of materials, rights, and obligations within a given political community and they are thus infused by antagonistic political values and ideas. Hence, the essence of disputatious rhetoric is not merely criticism and resistance, but the invention of alternative possibilities and ways of acting. Disputes highlight the fragmentary and temporary character of established regularities, institutions, and orders and create opportunities to challenge and reform them (Phillips, 1999). They, thus, contribute to shaping the horizon of the possible and desirable.

**Rhetorical analysis of political disputes**

The disputatious aspect of politics resonates with the spirit of rhetorical political analysis, a method of studying political language that affirms uncertainty and contestation as inexorable elements of politics (Finlayson, 2007, 2014; Martin and Finlayson, 2008). Members of political communities have different understandings of fundamental organising terms of public life, such as freedom or justice; therefore, any process of collective judgement formation and decision-making involves the task of creating consensus. This task takes the form of a process of reason giving and hence of articulating claims that justify the need to follow one course of action over another. This discursive process also entails the definition of subject positions and the negotiation of power relations between them. Consequently, rhetoric is not merely a tool for constituting meaning, but rather ‘the very mode and organising principle that circulates power relations, valuations, and logics’ (Nguyen, 2017: 7). The study of this process entails the identification of attempts to forge political consent within the wider context in which they emerge. Unlike other approaches to the study of public discourse (e.g. those inspired by linguistics), then, rhetorical inquiry attends to political language not in order to ‘reveal’ the ideological positions that inform it, but rather to examine how rhetorical phenomena are imbricated in the attempt to present certain ideological positions. Rhetorical inquiry concentrates more specifically on language in situated events and encounters, thus attending to social change as a process interweaving agency and structure (Martin, 2014). It considers both the specific social position of the agent of language and the spatial-temporal context within which she strategically intervenes and conveys meaning.

A rhetorical analysis of political disputes sheds light on the purposeful nature of communication and, therefore, on how political agents seek to influence a group or community’s understanding of a public issue and its views on action. It can also help clarify the object and source of disagreement, allowing for exploration of possible pathways for
convergence and organisation. Furthermore, it enables the analyst to link the dispute to
the complex of political ideas and ideologies that function as taps or sources of arguments
for all parties involved in the dispute. It thus elucidates options or positions available and
how these are linked to broader ideological and ideational webs. Crucially, a rhetorical
analysis can illuminate the terms of a dominant political project, how its agents seek to
maintain or reinforce their power, as well as how aspiring agents of change seek to chal-
lenge sedimented views and insert alternative ones in the uncertain terrain of politics.

In summary, a rhetorical analysis that is political in nature is informed by the following
three distinct elements:

1. It affirms the contextual and contestable nature of political positions. Indeed, one
   of its functions is to highlight these two traits (contextualisation and contestabil-
   ity) of political identification.
2. It studies attempts at persuasion on issues of public concern and therefore on
   issues that are decided collectively through processes of joint deliberation.
   Rhetorical engagement bridges the public and the private sphere, therefore, the
   study of political rhetoric sheds light to the values and ideas that are deemed
   appealing within a given context.
3. It considers the uncertainty of civic life and, therefore, the impossibility of refer-
   ring to an external absolute criterion in order to resolve disagreements. Although
   social and political norms underpin processes of deliberation, ultimately the for-
   mation of judgement depends on a variety of factors that are contingent and
   socially legitimated.

The rhetorical tradition has a wealth of tools to offer for political analysis. Here, I
would like to introduce commonplaces, a type of topics or lines of argument that speech-
writers in the antiquity would use to craft (‘invent’) arguments on a given subject (Corbett
and Connors, 1999: 24). Commonplaces function as key reference points that organise
meaning, playing the role of reservoirs for ideas used in crafting or inventing political
claims (Kennedy, 1994: 5). Aristotle (2001) distinguished between special topics – which
are pertinent to a particular kind of rhetoric – and common topics – which can be used in
the development of any subject. He even provided a list of the most important common-
places which could be used as resources for finding arguments. However, this list is not
necessarily relevant today; as Burke (1969: 62) notes, commonplaces are contextual and
evolve: certain commonplaces are more persuasive for people living under particular
circumstances. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) updated this list for the modern
context. These important works on commonplaces call into attention the predictability of
the way people organise and communicate their experience (Walsh, 2010: 125). The
study of commonplaces gives insight into regularities that guide collective judgement in
an otherwise uncertain terrain.

Commonplaces can become persistent within a political culture, thus gaining the trust
of an audience (Kennedy, 1994: 5). They are, hence, a useful tool for those seeking to
persuade on the validity of political projects and make them acceptable or even desirable.
Here, I argue that analysts of political discourse can use commonplaces to identify, map,
and compare the terms of a political dispute. Commonplaces function as reservoirs for
ideas and images that allow ‘the rhetor to become engaged in particular situations in a
creative way’ (Consigny, 1974: 182). By calling into attention the precise terms that con-
stitute the dispute, commonplaces allow for the identification of conventionalised ideas
and of entry points for recontestation. A rhetorical analysis thus can be useful both for scholars and for activists.

The dispute over climate change and ideology

Disagreement on climate change has many causes and facets. Hulme (2009) suggests that the sources of this disagreement vary from differing understandings of what counts as knowledge and what the role of science in politics is, to how people ascribe value to assets and resources differently. Values, moral principles, economic ideas, as well as emotions play an important role in debates over the understanding, importance, impact, and governance of climate change, a fact that points to the political nature of this dispute: it is not just a puzzle that scientists must somehow solve. Scientific consensus on the origins of climate change does not automatically translate into political consensus. As Sheila Jasanoff (2010) notes, even more important than establishing scientific facts is the task of establishing which facts matter, to whom, and why. A factor that permeates this process of understanding climate change is political ideology (Hornsey et al., 2016; McCright et al., 2016; Marquart-Pyatt et al., 2014). Despite policy consensus on the level of international environmental governance as crystallised in the outcomes of UN environmental summits (Conferences of the Parties: COPs), disputes over climate change do not take place within a post-political condition (Swyngedouw, 2010). As McCarthy (2013: 23) puts it, ‘there are in fact very substantial, significant, and ongoing struggles around the politics and politicisation of climate change that are directly at odds with’ the post-political argument. Disagreement on climate change does not take place in an ideology-free terrain.

Ideologies have an indispensable role in public life. Drawing on Althusser, Hall (2016) notes that ‘we always need systems through which we represent what the real is to ourselves and to others’. In this article, I follow Hall’s (1986: 29) definition of ideologies as ‘the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of though, and the systems of representation’ that people employ to make sense of social events. As new problems and challenges emerge, ideologies are the source where political agents can turn for ideas on how to make sense of their particular historical condition and respond to it. In rhetorical terms, it can be argued that ideologies provide actors with a series of locally established ‘commonplace’ arguments which can be adapted to the demands of the situation (Finlayson, 2012: 759). Although ideologies do not ‘own’ arguments, they are an important source for the formation and development of political claims; they also provide orientation with regard to unity and distinctiveness that characterise differing positions on a given debate or issue (Atkins, 2018). Ideologies can, therefore, shape the processes and outcomes of political deliberation on collective problems.

Ideologies function through what Norval (2000) calls decontestation, a process that delimits the range of possible contestation around central political concepts or modes of political identification. Decontestation renders claims, ideas, or propositions informed by ideological positions to appear natural, common sense, or beyond contestation and, therefore, beyond politics. This process is pertinent to the case of climate change. For example, a civic epistemology (Miller, 2008) that obsessively interprets climate change as a ‘market failure’ delimits public imagination and makes climate change appear as a problem that requires to simply ‘bring nature into the markets’. Engulfing views on how to respond to climate change within the broader ideological discourse of neoliberalism causes perceptions of climate change and solutions to it to reach a degree of stability or ‘sedimentation’ (Norval, 2000: 316) as they become entangled with this dominant ideological
position. A rhetorical analysis that uses commonplaces as its analytical tool can clarify the terms of such temporary sedimentation by calling into attention the persistent elements that render claims on proposed solutions conventionalised and stabilised. It can also offer insight into discursive alternatives that disturb such naturalised norms of climate action and call for alternative socio-ecological arrangements.

Studying the discourse on climate change

The method proposed here differs from other attempts to study the discursive formations through which environmental issues are articulated and enacted. Among the most important contributors in this area is John Dryzek, whose study aims to map and classify the proliferation of perspectives on environmental problems. Dryzek (2013: 9) defines discourse as ‘a shared way of apprehending the world’ which ‘enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts’. Discourses function by constructing meanings and relationships, thus helping define common sense and what is perceived as legitimate knowledge. It is because discourses rest ‘on assumptions, judgments, and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements’ (Dryzek, 2013: 9–10). I agree with Dryzek that language – and therefore, the ways we construct, interpret, discuss, and analyse environmental problems – matters; I conduct my analysis in the same spirit. I also concur with his affirmation that ‘just because something is socially interpreted does not mean it is unreal’ (Dryzek, 2013: 12). As Karen Litfin (1994) discusses in her study on discourses on ozone, ‘a realist ontology is consistent with a hermeneutical epistemology’. However, Dryzek’s commitment to the study of environmental discourses broadly construed draws his attention to the big picture rather than the details of particular instances of environmental discourse; as a result, he focuses on the forms that environmental discourses take in academic literature, policy, and civil society as they depart from the discourse of industrialism. In analysing what he calls the politics of the Earth, Dryzek (2013: 17) attends to agents of discourse and their motives, assumptions about natural relationships that underpin environmental discourses, key metaphors, and other rhetorical devices, as well as to the ‘ontology’ of each discourse. In contrast, my concern here is with more situated forms that environmental discourses take in the form of arguments within a particular political, social, and historical context.

From this perspective, my analysis shares ground with Maarten Hajer’s (1995) seminal work. Like Dryzek, Hajer (1995: 2) also draws on the method of discourse analysis to scrutinise ‘all those factors that influence the way in which we conceive of the environmental problematique’. Hajer’s analytical premise is the idea that conflict that emerges with regard to environmental problems is actually about the discursive constructions of these problems and hence on how they are defined and framed. Ultimately, Hajer seeks to present an institutional genealogy that explains ecological modernisation, a policy discourse that gained prominence since the mid 1980s. Like the approach suggested in this article, Hajer also takes an argumentative approach which ‘focuses on the constitutive role of discourse in political processes [. . .] and allocates a central role to the discoursing subjects’ (Hajer, 1995: 58), while also considering the social structures that enable and constrain their agency. To this extent, our modes of analysis are very similar.

Yet, there are three important differences between Hajer’s approach and the one followed here. First, he eschews the idea that actions and perceptions should be understood against the background of deeply held beliefs or belief systems (Hajer, 1995: 59). The
argumentative approach he proposes lies on the premise that discursive interaction (i.e. language in use) can create new meanings and new identities and that, therefore, it may alter cognitive patterns and create new cognitions and new positionings. In contrast, the rhetorical approach taken in this article views ideological commitments as infusing the articulation of ideas for climate action, thus creating irreducible conflicts among different social and political agents. Second, Hajer’s (1995:72) argumentative approach operationalises the idea that discourse is constitutive of environmental politics. As a result, any environmental conflict does not appear primarily as conflict over which sorts of action should be taken (or whether action should be taken), but as conflict over the meaning of physical and social phenomena. Although I concur that climate change has different social meanings in the context of different social and cultural contexts (Hulme, 2009), I find that, increasingly, the political dispute over climate change is first and foremost precisely a question over the course of action required to deal with it most effectively. This is particularly evident in the context of the case of the United Kingdom discussed here and, therefore, a context within which the dispute over climate change follows from the premise that climate change is happening, it is a problem, and must be addressed. Finally, Hajer’s analysis focuses on storylines and therefore on ‘narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding’ (Hajer, 1995: 62). The role of narratives is indeed indispensable in reducing complexity and creating opportunities for convergence and identification in the context of a debate, therefore opening the possibility of resolution. Yet, I propose that a more traditional rhetorical approach that focuses on the process that precedes the creation of the storyline and therefore attends to the commonplaces that eventually contribute to the creation of the narrative has more analytical strength. This is because invention refers to the process of discovering what is persuasive within a given context; it thus requires devising ways to articulate, define, and constitute relations between agents of arguments for climate action and their environments and practices (Hatzisavvidou, 2019). The study of this process enables students of politics to observe the inventionary resources, or commonplaces, that political agents use to formulate their claims and to outline courses of action. The following section outlines and puts in practice this analytical approach.

**A rhetorical approach to the discourse of climate action**

A political analysis of the rhetoric of climate action entails more than counting how many times ‘climate change’ appears on a text or the linguistic functions of metaphors and figures of speech that make the terms of the debate memorable and interesting. It entails studying how political actors communicate their ideological commitments and aspire to draw others to them. Implicit here is the question of power and therefore the issue of who is perceived as a legitimate actor, what practices and appeals are acceptable, and what states of affair are deemed natural or common sense. Although social and political changes become actualised through practical, material changes that take shape in policies, production and consumption patterns, behaviour changes, and so on, such forms of transformation also require change in the use of language. As Rebecca Solnit (2018: 2) puts it, ‘key to the work of changing the world [is] inventing or popularising new terms or bringing terms that were obscure into more popular use’. Such attentiveness to the inventionary power of language is congruent with Foucault (2008, 2011) approach to the study of social practices, which illuminates how social orders and subjectivities are created
through institutional discourses. The rhetorical study of the discourse of climate action shifts our attention to how the articulation of proposed solutions to the challenge of climate change becomes the terrain of ideological conflict.

Attention to commonplaces can help the analyst of the dispute over climate action to discern between the different ideas competing for public acceptance, but also to link them to broader debates on socio-ecological organisation. The first task allows for the identification of elements that have become fixed in the discourse of the dispute, thus acquiring a naturalised place within it. The case study offered in this article highlights that one such sedimented element is ‘economic growth’, now a commonplace in the rhetoric of climate action. The analysis also highlights the availability of alternative commonplaces such as ‘social equity’ and ‘well-being’. By linking these elements with broader ideological issues, a rhetorical analysis clarifies the place of the dispute within the wider context of the social formation, thus helping to draw directions for socio-ecological transformation and recontestation.

Commonplaces can help to arrange available arguments for climate action by discerning between dominant and insurgent ideological positions. A dominant position is one that has gained traction in the public domain and is viewed as expressing common sense or taken for granted assumptions about the world and how it should be organised. To the extent that it has been ‘conventionalised to display characteristics which, while not unchangeable have, nevertheless, reached a certain degree of stability’ (Norval, 2000: 316), a dominant view has become decontested. An insurgent position is one that seeks to challenge the dominant by inserting in public discourse terms and proposals that appeal to alternative or antithetical commonplaces, ideas, and norms of action. In the case study that follows, I highlight how this arrangement is played out in the 2019 General Election in the United Kingdom and I use this marker to identify and distinguish between the different visions for climate action competing for public acceptance.

**Case study: Commonplaces for climate action in the 2019 general election**

Although the dominant issue at the time of the 2019 General Election was Brexit, climate change received greater attention than it had ever before. Indeed, Chris Stark, chief executive of the Committee on Climate Change, argued that ‘this election really is the climate election’ (Shukman, 2019). The dispute over climate change in the United Kingdom has been intensified since 2010 developing into a partisan issue which, despite not reaching the level of intensity it has in the United States, became a key political battleground (Carter, 2014). This conflict culminated during the 2019 General Election, when a ‘climate debate’ was hosted by Channel 4 and attended by five political leaders (with Boris Johnson replaced by an ice sculpture). For the purposes of this article, I have analysed the manifestos published by five parties: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National, and Green Party. Despite focusing primarily on the sections devoted specifically on climate action, I have studied and integrated in the analysis every reference made on this issue in the manifestos. I have also considered the role of visual rhetoric in these text events, as images ‘provide rich moments of rhetorical invention’ (Olson and Goodnight, 1994: 273); at the same time, they can stiffen our imagination (Pezzulo and Cox, 2018: 91), as they naturalise the symbolic message communicated (Barthes, 1977: 45) and therefore can enhance a process of decontestation. The set of data chosen for this study is consistent with the requirements of a rhetorical analysis: it aims to persuade, it is
context-specific, and remains open to contestation, as the values that underpin it cannot be verified or discredited using external objective criteria.

The analysis evidences that some parties (Conservative, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP)) used – in different intensities – ‘economic growth’ as the commonplace for the invention of arguments for climate action. Economic growth – measured as the rise of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – has been the single most important policy goal across the world for most of the last century (Jackson, 2017). The argument that it is possible to continue growing the global economy, while protecting the natural environment is so common that growth ideology dictates the terms of national and international climate discourse (Hamilton, 2003). Although the roots of this argument can be located in the 1990s and the paradigm of ecological modernisation (Nordhaus, 1991), it gained prominence on the level of institutional and political support in the years following the global financial crisis of 2007–2009. According to this line of thinking, the impact of the ecological crisis could be minimised or even rectified by introducing a new grand narrative and a new vision for development: that of ‘green economy’, in the context of which green growth would provide the alternative to the model of growth followed until then. In this context, climate change specifically was framed as an economic opportunity and specifically as the opportunity to create new markets and therefore new jobs in an altering economy. Since then this argument became the dominant political response to climate change as a number of international organisations, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United Nations (UN), popularised this argument through their documents and practices.

The ideology of growthism is contested by those who view the very logic of free market capitalism as being in opposition to physical reality and planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009). They, therefore, refute the idea that capitalism can be ‘greened’, arguing that the logic of accumulation and growth that is inherent in capitalism further exaggerates problems caused by resource exploitation (Benton, 1989; White et al., 2017). Yet, even among those who endorse this particular position, there is disagreement over how societies should be organised in view of unprecedented climate changes. For example, proponents of a Green New Deal advocate decarbonisation through radical transformation to replace the capitalist social order with democratised control over major energy systems and resources (Pettifor, 2019). Others emphasise that it is possible to remain agnostic about growth when planning economic activities while considering human prosperity, irrespectively of whether GDP growing or not (Raworth, 2017). They thus advocate a post-growth vision that revolves around social equity and ecological integrity. Yet, others foreground the importance of placing the well-being of humans and nature at the centre of economic and social organisation (Gudynas, 2011). The analysis that follows shows that these ideas are not merely part of scholarly debates; they inform arguments for climate action in the United Kingdom.

The commonplace of ‘economic growth’ had a prominent place in the manifestos presented by the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. One of the key six commitments of the Conservative Party (2019) was ‘reaching net zero by 2050 with investment in clean energy solutions and green infrastructure to reduce carbon emissions and pollution’, pledging to ‘protect the planet’ through ‘free markets, innovation and prosperity’. The climate action plan proposed by the Conservatives is fuelled by technological innovation and investment ‘in clean energy solutions and green infrastructure’, exemplified by ‘the innovations of British battery-makers and turbine designers’ (Conservative Party, 2019: 3). The plan would ‘deliver economic growth’ (Conservative Party, 2019: 7).
Working with the market, the Party promised ‘to deliver two million new high-quality jobs in clean growth’ that will deliver ‘clean energy’, and ‘clean transport’ (Conservative Party, 2019: 55).

In a similar fashion, Liberal Democrats (2019) pledged to ‘take urgent action to save our planet’ outlining a vision for ‘a green society’ and ‘a green economy’ (Liberal Democrats, 2019: 39) within the context of ‘a growing economy’ (Liberal Democrats, 2019: 18). Their plan argued for cutting greenhouse gas emissions by ‘creating markets for climate-friendly products’ (Liberal Democrats, 2019: 12), ‘investing in climate-friendly infrastructure and technology and creating new green businesses and jobs’ (Liberal Democrats, 2019: 15), thus turning ‘the birthplace of the industrial revolution into the home of the new Green Revolution’ (Liberal Democrats, 2019: 40). The use of images of wind turbines in the manifesto visually supported and complemented this plan, thus reproducing the dominant argument that technological progress and economic growth can be achieved in harmony with the natural environment. All humans have to do is harness the power of nature and put it in the service of economic growth and progress.

For the Conservative Party, environmental protection can deliver economic growth through investment in infrastructure, science, and research. For Liberal Democrats (2019), climate change was explicitly viewed as ‘a massive opportunity to create a different future’ (Liberal Democrats, 2019: 39), greener and climate-friendly. In both cases, growth served as the main commonplace for the invention of arguments for taking action against climate change, with investment in technology and innovation celebrated as the means to achieve economic growth while cutting carbon emissions. For both parties, growth and environmental protection go hand-by-hand; one cannot be delivered without the other. Such intensification of investment, manufacturing, and construction contributes significantly to economic growth, job creation, and energy efficiency. Nonetheless, in practice, the argument that economic growth can be combined with action to avoid climate breakdown lacks empirical support (Hickel and Kallis, 2019). It not only intensifies the marketisation of nature and climate change, but it also diverts attention from the issues of social justice inherent in environmental issues (D’Alessandro et al., 2020). It is not surprising, then, that other parties deviated from this dominant view.

SNP (2019) makes for an interesting case because, although it acknowledged the centrality of economic growth in its vision for Scotland, it simultaneously argued that economic growth cannot be ‘unrestricted’ and must be ‘sustainable’. The SNP pledged ‘a moral responsibility to tackle climate change’ and ‘transition to net zero while creating economic opportunity’ (SNP, 2019: 29), while changing the way the economy works to ‘address economic injustice at source’ and preventing the catastrophic ‘impact of unrestricted economic growth’ (SNP, 2019: 23) on the environment. Although sustainability was at the heart of the SNP’s climate plan, the manifesto did not make clear how any restrictions to growth would be applied or how they would be compatible with the goals of increased investment and job opportunities.

The case of Labour was also interesting, in that its manifesto sought to insert an alternative position into the climate debate. In advocating a Green Industrial Revolution that would create 1 million jobs to transform ‘industry, energy, transport, agriculture and buildings, while restoring nature’ (Labour Party, 2019: 12), Labour adopted the terminology of the emerging solution of a Green New Deal. Its manifesto was more detailed compared to other that of other parties, outlining plans for how investment would be used as part of a programme for decarbonising the energy sector, with infrastructure operating
under public ownership and training offered to workers who would be employed in the sector as part of a green just transition. Such an embrace of intensified green economic activity without appeal to growth is congruent with the insurgent vision of post-growth. The use of images of wind turbines and electric buses in the Labour manifesto visually supported the argument that post-growth does not have to mean the return to a pre-modern condition. Statements such as ‘transforming our economy into one low in carbon, rich in good jobs, radically fairer’ (Labour Party, 2019: 11), ‘tackling the destruction of our planet is a question of justice’ (Labour Party, 2019: 12), ‘our commitments to ecosystem repair and environmental protections work hand in hand with sustainable jobs and industries, and social justice’ (Labour Party, 2019: 22) point to the fact that the commonplace of Labour’s arguments for a ‘green transition’ is social equity.

The Greens were the only party that explicitly denounced economic growth, stating that it ‘will no longer be the way we measure progress’ (Green Party, 2019: 8). The flagship of the Green manifesto was the Green New Deal, a comprehensive plan covering all aspects of economy and society that aims not merely at tackling climate breakdown but also at transforming the economy and society in a fair way. Investment is targeted towards communities and businesses that depend on polluting industries and the overarching goal is to ‘kick-start the great transition to a net zero carbon economy and a better quality of life’ (Green Party, 2019: 88). The commonplace for climate action in the Green manifesto is the concept of well-being, interpreted as ‘improvement in health, reduction of inequality and the restoration and protection of the natural environment on which we all depend’ (Green Party, 2019: 8). The purpose of taking climate action is human and ecological well-being. The lack of images of wind turbines and electric buses from the Green manifesto is not incidental; the visual arguments deployed by the Greens involved climate activists protesting against the climate emergency and Green politicians meeting with people. This is not to suggest that UK Greens do not appeal to technology; the implementation of their Green New Deal requires investment in technologies and energy systems that will replace polluting with renewable ones. What is important is that the goal of such transformations is not the pursuit of economic growth but ‘the wellbeing of citizens, society and the natural world’.

Conclusion

As the case study used in this article illustrates, climate change remains a highly contested issue even within a context where outright denial is marginalised and absent from official party declarations. Despite agreement on the fact that it constitutes a problem, there is disagreement on how this problem should be interpreted and addressed. The polyphony in this dispute is the result of deep ideological commitments and disagreements. As the source, site, but also the constraining force of rhetorical intervention, commonplaces are the key to discerning the essence of this dispute, as well as its place in the broader negotiation of political stakes and ideas. Using commonplaces to analyse the political dispute on climate change, the analyst can clarify the terms of the dispute by attending specifically to any sedimented norms of action that guide arguments (e.g. ‘climate action should and can be combined with economic growth’). She can also track changes in political discourse, for example mapping how commonplaces change over time, a task that is left for another project.

The value of this approach is that mapping the arguments for climate action using commonplaces can provide a more nuanced understanding of public debates. With the
premises of arguments analysed and put into comparative perspective, it is possible to consider more thoroughly the positions put forward by parties that claim to offer alternatives. A rhetorical analysis that pays attention to commonplaces can illuminate how insurgent ideological positions (e.g. ‘post-growth’) seek to disrupt dominant approaches to climate action by inserting into public discourse alternative commonplaces (e.g. ‘social equity’, ‘well-being’). Rhetorical analysis shows how ideas used in climate action debates are linked to broader agendas and wider debates about socio-ecological organisation. It thus identifies possibilities for new sites of political identification by pointing to alternative principles of action and opening spaces for recontestation.

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