

Symbolic environmental politics

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The negative social and ecological impacts of the lifestyles of privileged countries or social groups around the globe are becoming ever more visible. As their patterns of self-realisation, notions of the good life and particular interpretations of their inalienable rights are dangerously disrupting natural eco-systems and militating against core values of human dignity, wellbeing and equality, a profound transformation of the socio-economic order seems more urgent than ever. Yet among political decision makers half-heartedness, pretending and delay seem endemic. Exactly this is what critics often refer to as *symbolic politics*. But symbolism and symbolic action actually entail more than false promises and the deception of disempowered citizens by the rich and powerful. In fact, symbols are an indispensable ingredient of all political communication; and in environmental politics, too, their strategic use is a practice that all actors are engaged in.

The picture of planet Earth as seen from outer space has become a symbol of the unity and vulnerability of the terrestrial eco-system. Pictures of modern wind-turbines or photovoltaic panels have become a symbol of technological innovation helping to protect the natural environment. International climate summits are a symbol of global cooperation towards the realisation of shared eco-political goals. In private households, bottle-recycling and the purchase of particular products are symbolic practices which stand for and anticipate much more comprehensive changes in the way we live and relate to our environment. And the provision of vegan appetisers at a private prosecco-reception may be the symbolic expression of a particular lifestyle or personal image.



Source: General Electric

Symbols are signs which refer to something, the signified, which may be so large and comprehensive that it transcends human cognitive and practical capacities. Symbols then help to experience the unimaginable – or make present what remains absent. In that they reduce and organise complexity, symbols help to make sense of the world and facilitate communication. They transport narratives of meaning which are jointly produced by those trying to package something into a symbol and those reading something out of it. In highly differentiated and fast-changing societies, they can help forge agreement and assist decision making. In contexts of uncertainty or lacking resources, symbolic action may maintain political momentum until more information has become available, or more resources and support have been mobilised for the implementation of more satisfactory solutions. And in the media- and information-society, where an ever increasing number of actors are competing for ever more limited public attention, and where *communicated*, *mediated* reality seem set to gain priority over so-called *primary* or *authentic* reality, symbols and symbolic action are becoming ever more important, still.

Deception, manipulation and power

Thus, symbols and symbolic action fulfil a range of indispensable functions and their use is not exclusive to only some political actors. Yet, the prevailing understanding of the term symbolic politics is – in environmental discourses as elsewhere – still what the American political scientist Murray Edelman described and criticised already in the 1960s: a strategic tool in the hands of ruthless power-elites used to deceive, manipulate and control the disempowered masses (Edelman, 1964). In fact, as after a long period of confidence in an educated citizenry and democratic self-governance, populist actors and rhetoric are profoundly reshaping public political discourse, this understanding of symbolic politics is today very prominent again. It portrays modern societies as being divided into a small, self-interested, corrupt elite and the masses of disenfranchised and alienated citizens, deceived by their leaders and denied their right to political self-determination. For Edelman, this mass public was confined to the role of the spectator, with a limited understanding of, and no genuine influence

on, the political process, but coopted into it by means of political rituals (such as democratic elections) and myths (such as the narrative of representation) carefully designed to secure public acquiescence and stabilize established power relations.

Edelman himself did not make specific reference to environmental issues, but his notion of symbolic politics became constitutive for eco-political mobilization throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, eco-emancipatory movements continued to see modern society as divided into a powerful, self-interested elite and the disempowered citizenry. Yet, this mass public now evolved into an increasingly educated and self-confident political actor, 'civil society', which challenged the established order. It conceived of itself as the subject and voice of the public environmental interest and nature's right to integrity. Political and economic elites, in contrast, were perceived as anti-environmental and interested only in their own privileges. To demands for the extension of democratic rights and structural changes to the established socio-economic order, policy makers appeared to respond only with measures which they knew were ineffective and which were designed to deliver no more than the minimum required to mollify public unrest. These policy measures were seen to articulate a false commitment and make promises which the elites had no intention to ever fulfill. This symbolic politics was perceived as dishonest and immoral, an alibi indicative of a political system that refuses to respond to legitimate public demands, places elite interests over the common good, and denies citizens their right to political self-determination. But the emancipatory movements were confident that once this symbolic politics had been exposed and the self-serving elites removed, the true public interest and environmental good could swiftly be implemented.

The ideal of *authentic politics* versus the critique of *symbolic politics*

| | Authentic Politics | Symbolic Politics |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| primary objective | to resolve problems, to effect change | to stabilise established structures, to mollify public unrest |
| moral quality | genuine commitment | false pretence, dishonest |
| policy effectiveness | high | low |
| democratic quality | representative, responsive, nurtures trust | elitist, manipulative, undermines trust |

Post-ecologism and simulative politics

Up to the present, this conceptualisation and critique of symbolic environmental politics has its uses and legitimacy. Yet, modern societies have evolved beyond the conditions which once underpinned this notion. Indeed, in the contemporary context, the simplistic narrative it evokes contributes as much to obstructing a differentiated

understanding of modern societies' eco-politics as to shedding light on it. Today, the idea of the dualistic divide of society into an anti-environmental elite and an ecologically committed civil society is – although popular – untenable: As issues of climate change and sustainability are anchored in all policy agendas, elites cannot collectively be categorised as anti-environmental; and as the differentiation of modern societies has given rise to many different ideas of nature and diverse views of what ought to be sustained, for whom, and for what reasons, civil society is not the unified voice of an unambiguous environmental and public interest. Furthermore, even if a consensus about the ecologically necessary was achieved, there is no reason to assume that it could easily be implemented. Not only are major parts of the societal mainstream – despite all environmental awareness and commitment – equally committed to values and lifestyles which they know to be socially and ecologically destructive. But the development of modern societies is significantly shaped by forces which are beyond their governments' control, and which restrict their capacity for coordinated, sustained and effective (eco-)political action.

This condition where ambiguity is proliferating, political agency eroding and major parts of the well-educated citizenry are environmentally committed but also deeply attached to values and lifestyles which are known to be socially exclusive and ecologically destructive, has been conceptualised as the *post-ecologist* constellation (Blühdorn, 2000; 2014). It breeds disillusionment and frustration that overshadows the optimism of the earlier environmental movement. The lack of uncontroversial ecological imperatives is disorientating and politically disabling. For individual citizens and collective actors, the tension between the evidence that established values and behaviours can be sustained only at significant social and ecological costs, and the desire to hold on to them anyway, leads into irresolvable contradictions. In this situation, all kinds of symbolic action become an attractive coping mechanism: they provide opportunities to articulate ecological values and experience social commitment, while postponing any major revision of established value preferences and lifestyles (Blühdorn, 2017). And the old narrative of symbolic politics gains new significance because it offers simple explanations for the bleak and schizophrenic condition.

Building on the work of the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, this inherently paradoxical eco-politics in the post-ecologist constellation has been described as *simulative politics* (Blühdorn, 2007). Baudrillard diagnosed a condition where citizens have ever less first-hand experience of what they are talking about and refer ever more to a reality constructed via images and signs. In this scenario, the world of signs, he believed, develops its own life, and images and symbols no longer organise and *make sense of* primary reality but – as the referent of societal communication – *replace* it. Truth then turns into a *simulacrum*, and societal conduct into *simulation* (Baudrillard 1981/1994). In this same sense, simulative environmental politics has been said to discursively perform a societal – and eco-political – condition unaffected by the paradoxes outlined above. In contrast to the notion of symbolic politics, this

concept shifts the emphasis away from the critique of established power-relations to a socio-cultural diagnosis of advanced modern societies. Its focus is not on the manipulative practices of particular elites, but on procedures of self-deception which are pervasive throughout society. In contemporary societies' eco-politics, both symbolic and simulative politics are ever-present and closely intertwined. Together the two concepts facilitate a richer understanding of the reality of *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn, 2011; 2013).

The concepts of *symbolic politics* versus *simulative politics*

| | Symbolic Politics | Simulative Politics |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| perspective | normative, activist | descriptive, analytical |
| aim of concept | critique of elites, improvement of policy | diagnosis of and explanation for societal impasse |
| actor in focus | government institutions, economic and political elites | many actors across society |
| suggested function | deception and manipulation of public, to stabilise established power-relations | management of contradictions, coping strategy for irresolvable value conflicts |
| availability of alternatives | effective politics is perfectly feasible | caught up in conundrum |

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Learning Resources

The resources listed below provide analyses of current sustainability and environmental politics through the lens of symbolic and simulative politics.

- Baker, S. 2007. 'Sustainable Development as Symbolic Commitment: Declaratory Politics and the Seductive Appeal of Ecological Modernisation in the European Union'. *Environmental Politics* 16 (2): 297-317.
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