In Search of Climate Politics

To think politically about climate change, we need to elaborate the arguments I sketched out via the University of Ottawa divestment story in Chapter 1. First, we need to conceptualize explicitly what we mean by politics. Second, we need to think about the political drivers of (and obstacles to) climate change action, a question I will suggest can be understood via a notion of cultural political economy. Third, we need to think about the dynamics that arise out of these first two, which I take to be two-fold: On the one hand a recurring dynamic between depoliticization and repoliticization, and on the other hand a tension I characterize as ‘purification vs. complexity’, between the instinct to want to find simple ‘solutions’ or enemies to fight, and the multidimensional qualities of the high carbon world that needs to be transformed. To start, however, it is perhaps worth thinking a little about how climate change is commonly conceptualized and framed, in public discourse as well as across various academic disciplines, in order to tease out what the politics of these specific climate change frames are.

2.1 Politics in Existing Framings of Climate Change

There are many such frames and I gloss over lots of nuance here, but I group them into three for the current purposes: System adjustment and maintenance frames, systemic inequalities and contestation frames, and system transformation frames.

2.1.1 System Adjustment and Maintenance Frames

These tend to conceptualize climate change, and propose interventions in relation to it, from within the dominant sets of ideas within the contemporary social order, and aim, implicitly or explicitly, to minimize the impacts of climate policy on that order. At a broad level we can see this in the almost-obsessive focus among policymakers – in rich and poor countries alike – with what the impacts of any specific
climate policy will be on GDP growth. This functions as a fundamental constraint on climate policy and often the decisive criteria against which a policy is judged — if the impacts on growth are too severe, the policy will be rejected, and conversely, if policies that can accelerate growth can be identified, they will be favoured. Within this overall orientation to climate change focused on system maintenance, we can see a few specific ways of framing climate change.

First is the framing of climate change as a simple ‘emissions problem’. Here, climate change is understood in relation to the immediate emissions — CO₂, CH₄, CFCs, etc. — but the frame is that the underlying sources of those emissions are not interrogated (an ‘emissions fetishism’ if you like, see Lohmann 2010). At the same time, the focus is on the departure of emissions levels from the status quo rather than on the end goal of emissions levels. The structure of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreements and national policy processes has tended to reflect this frame, in the UNFCCC’s initial goal (see United Nations 1992, articles 4.2a and b) of stabilizing industrialized countries’ emissions by 2000 at 1990 levels, the Kyoto Protocol’s goal of a 5.2 per cent cut of industrialized countries’ emissions by 2008–2012, and many countries’ individual targets from their unilateral ones announced in the early 1990s through to their Nationally Determined Contributions (the principal obligation states undertook) under the Paris Agreement.¹ This focus on departure from the status quo makes policymakers think about short- to medium-term cuts of 5, 10, or 20 per cent, neglecting any sense of broad transformations involved in responding to climate change in favour of focusing on specific gains within the existing overall structure.

The second frame is of climate change as a ‘market failure’ problem. This is the dominant economists’ understanding of the problem (see classically Stern 2007). Markets either fail to adequately reflect the ‘real’ costs of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and thus government intervention is needed to ‘internalize’ these costs (the Pigouvian approach) or alternatively there are inadequately specified property rights that lead to suboptimal resource use (the Coasian approach). Either way, intervention, either through taxation or allocating property rights, is needed to correct these market failures. Intrinsically however, it is not necessary to establish a particular end goal in terms of levels of emissions; rather, once prices adequately reflect real costs, the market will decide the ‘optimal’ rate of GHG emissions.

Third is a related understanding of climate change as a ‘global commons’ problem. This is ubiquitous especially in thinking about the global dimensions of climate change as exemplified in the relevant chapter of the last IPCC report (Stavins et al. 2014). Here, the problématique of climate is turned into one of

¹ The Paris Agreement does supplement this with a collective long-term goal of limiting temperature rises to 2°C, and to aim for 1.5°C, but this only bears a tangential relationship to the national-level targets, generated ‘bottom-up’ by countries, which remain framed in terms of departures from the status quo.
cooperation: How to get disparate actors with different particular interests but a shared common interest in ‘solving the problem’ to overcome both their specific differences and the general problem of trust and free-riding seen to be persistent in such collective action problems. This frame is the basis for the vast majority of work on the international dimensions of climate politics in particular, given the lack of a global authority capable of compelling states to act on climate change. As Tom Princen usefully reminds us, however, there can be extensive cooperation that is simultaneously utterly useless in addressing the underlying problem (Princen 2003, 2005).

2.1.2 Systemic Inequalities and Contestation Frames

For many, climate change is understood more in relation to questions of inequality and (in)justice. One of the key early interventions in international climate debates (Agarwal and Narain 1991) argued for the need to think explicitly about the key differences in human circumstances entailed in climate change, that are dangerously elided when we think of climate as a commons or simple emissions problem. They showed that how you account for GHGs matters – if you only count aggregate emissions for each country vs. per capita emissions, you get a greatly different sense of who is responsible for climate change. And if you fail to distinguish between what they called ‘luxury’ and ‘survival’ emissions, you compound that injustice. Once you count properly, they argued, it becomes easy to see that climate change is effectively a form of global ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2013) where the world’s rich, mostly located in the global North, impose the costs and impacts of climate change on the poor and vulnerable, mostly located in the global South.

This generates what is often known as a ‘climate justice’ frame (e.g. Shue 2014; Ciplet et al. 2015). This sort of a frame motivates many social movements involved in climate politics. Increasingly, these inequalities and injustices in climate change politics are understood as multiple, not simply a North–South question but intersecting with other key social–structural faultlines of gender, race, and class (e.g. Newell 2005; MacGregor 2014; Buckingham and Le Masson 2017; Pearse 2017), and sometimes along more crude lines focused on the way that intensified inequality means that the ‘1 per cent’, or the very rich, have particularly important roles in generating climate change (Kenner 2019).

2.1.3 System Transformation Frames

For system transformation frames, climate change is fundamentally a transformative process, popularized by Naomi Klein’s memorable title This Changes Everything.
(2014). Humanity as a whole has never collectively attempted the sort of profound transformation – at once social, technological, political, and economic – that taking the carbon out of the global economy involves, while dealing with those climate changes already in train (Newell and Paterson 2010, 1). It entails a rapid, radical change in more or less every aspect of the infrastructure of social life: Work, travel, housing (and all the objects in our homes), cooking, farming – all will change, and a good number of specific activities will simply disappear. This transformation will come about either because we decarbonize fully in the next forty years or so or because climate change itself overwhelms the capacity of our institutions to adapt adequately. And it is also those radical, rapid transformations that human societies have undergone – of which industrialization from Britain in the nineteenth century (with its global causes and consequences, most notably in slavery) to China today – have almost always been brutal for more or less everyone who experienced them, and often highly violent affairs.

There are a number of ways that such a transformation has been understood, however, with different political implications. First is the discourse of ‘decarbonization’ (see e.g. http://deepdecarbonization.org/). This discourse, which emerged first around 2000, introduces an important shift, in that it does focus explicitly on the question of transformation of the energy system, and contains within it an explicit end goal (see Paterson 2016 on the logic of ‘decarbonization’ as a frame). The discourse has certainly been productive in political terms, enabling some countries to imagine more radical policies than a narrower ‘emissions problem’ frame has. But decarbonization remains quite slippery and highly malleable in that what decarbonization might mean is unclear. It could simply mean that the carbon doesn’t get in the atmosphere (via Carbon Capture and Storage, CCS) or even that it does get there but is then removed (via Carbon Dioxide Removal, CDR, technologies). In this case it is perhaps simply a radical version of the emissions problem, enabling an imagination of zero net emissions without necessarily changing the energy system that radically. But decarbonization permits more radical interpretations also, including that of a transition away from fossil fuels.

Second is the ‘low carbon transitions’ understanding of climate change (e.g. Scrase and Smith 2009; Bulkeley et al. 2010; Geels 2014). The transitions approach has become a dominant frame especially in some northern European countries, and also frames climate change as a question of energy system transformation. This usually has a theoretical underpinning in complex systems theory, which is deployed to understand how large complex systems tend to reproduce themselves over time (via concepts such as path dependence, lock-in, and so on) but also to think about how ‘tipping points’ might be generated to shift the socio-technical energy system from a high-carbon state to a low- or zero-carbon state. Some of this
literature emphasizes how difficult a problem climate change is, referring to it as ‘superwicked’ (Levin et al. 2012). Compared to the decarbonization frame, it is worth underscoring that it is much more specific in emphasizing the transition as a socio-technical one in the energy system (whereas decarbonization focuses principally on the carbon itself) and focuses closely on how transitions in complex systems occur.

Third is the framing of climate change as ‘the end of fossil fuels’ (Princen et al. 2015; Paterson 2020). This frame has its roots variously in the emergence of the 2°C target during the 2000s, Ecuador’s attempt to get industrialized countries to provide money to avoid pumping oil from the Yasuní National Park, the emergence of ‘leave it in the ground’ storylines of climate justice groups campaigning in the UNFCCC and in relation to mountain top removal mining, fracking, oil pipelines, and then fossil fuel divestment. It was then solidified in the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report in 2013–14 and the Paris Agreement in 2015, both of which expressed clearly that the end game was now ‘net zero emissions’, which many commentators realized means in practice zero fossil fuel use (and of course also probably ‘negative emissions technologies’).

Fourth is an explicit anti-capitalist framing of climate change (see e.g. Clark and York 2005; Lohmann 2006; Pelling et al. 2011; Koch 2012; Klein 2014; Malm 2015; Wright and Nyberg 2015; Mann and Wainwright 2018; also, cf. Newell and Paterson 2010). For many activists deploying the ‘system change’ slogan alluded to in Chapter 1, the system referred to here is capitalism. The transformation entailed in this frame is therefore a transformation, even a revolution, towards a non-capitalist form of society. The key dynamics of capitalism understood within this frame as inimical to dealing with climate change are varied, but the most important are the dependence on and obsession with economic growth / capital accumulation; the dominance of the profit motive in decision-making and the constant desire to externalize social and ecological costs; the intrinsic nature of the link between fossil energy and capitalist development; its persistent inequalities and injustices (hence this articulates closely with the climate justice frame); and the structural power of business within the politics-as-site.

2.2 Thinking Politically about Climate Change

We can see that a substantial number of these frames seek to frame climate change as something to be taken out of the realm of explicit public/democratic decision-making and dealt with by some form of technocratic/expert process – a question of markets, efficiency, and (socio)technological innovation, notably. This is a dynamic of depoliticization, which I spell out more later on. This is very clearly the case with the ‘system maintenance’ frames idea of climate as an emissions
problem, a market failure or a commons problem. Even when they have an implicit notion of conflict – as in the commons frame for example – this is rendered technical through the language of collective action problems and reduced analytically via game theory into a question of incentives, side-payments, optimal solutions, and the like. This is most explicitly seen in the questioning of whether democracy can address climate change adequately, as we saw in Chapter 1. The ‘systemic inequalities’ frames often foreground power (but not always, as sometimes they become a simple ethical plea or normative vision) but mostly miss the point about transformation. But this is even the case with a good number of the ‘system transformation’ frames (decarbonization, transitions) that have within them a notion of transformation associated with climate change (see also Blythe et al. 2018). Even the ‘end of fossil fuels’, while it foregrounds questions of power and is explicitly political in the sense of being focused on the struggle between fossil fuel corporations and the rest of humanity, risks depoliticizing by foreclosing debate through the invocation of a hard end point that constrains the open public debate regarded by many as intrinsic to political life. But to understand these particular points about those frames, we need to go ‘back to basics’ about what we mean when we use the term politics.

2.2.1 Conceptualizing Politics

Politics can be understood in three distinct ways, all of which express something that we mean when we use the term in everyday speech, which political science as an academic discipline has tried to express more precisely.\(^2\)

First is to think about politics as the site(s) of collective authoritative decision-making. This is what is usually contained in the commonplace conflation of politics with parliament, legislation, government, and in the abstraction of this focus in much of contemporary political science via the concept of ‘the State’. It is what Leftwich (2004) refers to when he discusses thinking about politics as an ‘arena’. But even when we focus, as lots of recent research on climate politics does, on novel arenas for climate change – transnational, multilevel, non-state, public–private hybrids, and so on – what is political about climate is that it entails collective decisions that make rules that bind us, distribute authority and resources, and decide between competing options, interests, and values. To be interested in

\(^2\) I am certainly condensing here more than many might feel comfortable with. Colin Hay (2002, 61–62) gives twelve definitions in regular use, for example, although I think many of those collapse into the three I give here. There is one in particular that I leave out here but which is present in some existing work on climate politics. This is where politics is explicitly conceptualized as a question of strategic intervention towards the pursuit of emancipation. Mann and Wainwright (2018) for example think about climate politics mostly this way, as do from various perspectives Connolly (2017), MacGregor (2014), and Wall (2020), although they also at times articulate it as a set of arenas or power struggles.
climate politics is thus to be interested in the dynamics involved in and between these sites. What sorts of decisions get made? How (and how effectively) do the decision-making processes work? How do the decisions become authoritative and bind actors to them?

This way of thinking goes back to the canons of Western political thought. The term itself derives of course from the Greek ‘polis’, meaning simply the city, and where the very existence of politics is premised on the emergence of urban civilization and expressed in specific institutional arenas – the agora as a site of direct legislative decision-making, combined with election by lot to a governing authority, notably (of course always premised on slavery, and the exclusion of women and foreigners from citizenship) – that give us one important meaning for politics. For some, the conception is more restrictive still: Not only is politics only an arena, and in fact a specific kind of arena. Bernard Crick (among others) most vociferously argued that not all forms of government entail politics: ‘politics is simply the activity by which government is made possible when differing interests in an area to be governed grow powerful enough to need to be conciliated’ (Crick 2000, 30). For Crick, not all governments entail politics – either because the societies are not complex enough to have many ‘differing interests’ or, where some groups are able and willing to use sufficient coercion to mean other groups do not have to ‘be conciliated’, domination or tyranny exists, but not politics.

But this argument by Crick neglects a second way to think about politics, which is through the concept of power. As classically stated by Max Weber,

When a question is said to be a ‘political’ question, when a cabinet minister or an official is said to be a ‘political’ official, or when a decision is said to be ‘politically’ determined, what is always meant is that interests in the distribution, maintenance, or transfer of power are decisive for answering the questions and determining the decision or the official’s sphere of activity.

(Weber 2013/1919, 78)

Leftwich (2004) refers to this as thinking about politics as a ‘process’. For Hay (2002, 169), ‘power is to politics what time is to history’, that is, the central organizing concept that is both the focus of attention and also the key process that is assumed to be why studying politics is important. Power is also crucial to a classic definition of politics as ‘who gets what, when, how’ (Lasswell 1936). Crick, by contrast, regarded this as not fundamental to politics, writing ‘why call struggle for power “politics” when it is simply a struggle for power’ (Crick 2000, 20).

To think about politics in terms of power is to direct attention less at specific institutions but to a much broader set of social processes. Indeed politics becomes more or less omnipresent in this way of thinking – hence why phrases such as ‘the personal is political’ become meaningful – this was deployed initially by feminists and then taken up by others to refer to how broader political systems and processes
structure personal life (the State regulates marriage, fertility, sexual violence, and so on) but also how power relations are entailed in personal relations themselves and thus those relations can be understood as political. We are thus interested in various diverse questions about the sources of power; who gets power and how; the different ways it operates and produces effects; and how all these aspects of power can change over time. But we are also immediately interested in how power is contested and challenged, since the exertion of power rarely occurs without some resistance.

A third way I want to think about politics is to take sides with those who argue that politics should be understood as fundamentally a conflictual rather than consensual process. There is a tradition of thought that insists that politics is in fact a rather rare occurrence, and only occurs when there are institutions and practices that seek to deliberate collectively, balance competing interests fairly, reason properly about decisions, and seek consensus wherever possible. This is Crick’s view very explicitly but it can also be seen in the ‘deliberative turn’ in democratic theory, most commonly associated with Dryzek (e.g. 2000): The point of politics is to seek some sort of accommodation between competing interests, through a process of deliberation rather than bargaining. In contrast, Mouffe (2005) has provided the most widely read arguments that this insistence on deliberation and consensus is at best a naïve misunderstanding and at worst a dangerous threat to democratic practices. It is naïve in missing what she sees as the fundamentally antagonistic quality of human societies – that we are organized into competing collective identities (classes, nations, etc.), whose constitution depends fundamentally on their articulation in relation to ‘others’. ‘The political’ is thus necessarily antagonistic. Power relations thus are central to this account of politics but the antagonisms are not solely reducible to conflicts over power. But while this is (for her) the misunderstanding of politics made by people such as Crick or Dryzek, Mouffe also argues that to aim for consensus when the underlying logic of politics is conflictual, as many contemporary political parties and leaders have done (in the West, from Mitterand in the 1980s, to Blair and Clinton in the 1990s), is on the one hand to be ‘post-political’ in the sense of pretending that fundamental conflicts can be wished away, and on the other hand to mean that those conflicts must take on more radical forms, enabling the emergence of anti-democratic forces – theocratic, racist, populist, and so on – to thrive. The challenge of democracy is to transform the intrinsically antagonistic character of politics not into a fake consensus but into an ‘agonistic’ politics: Turning enemies (who must be eliminated) into opponents (who must be beaten but respected).

Machin (2013) walks us through a narrative of different accounts of climate politics to arrive at one drawing on Mouffe’s (2005) agonistic account of politics. That is to say, against a range of political analyses that focus variously on
deliberation, and even politics as a consensual activity, Mouffe and Machin insist that politics must be understood, and climate politics with it, as a conflictual process, and the democratic challenge is to contain conflict and political competition effectively – so it becomes ‘agonistic’ rather than ‘antagonistic’, that is, tending to collapse into warfare or fascism. The hard distinction between deliberation and conflict is perhaps overplayed: Dryzek (e.g. 1999) situates his arguments for deliberative democracy specifically in relation to ongoing social conflicts, and deliberation is not framed as a means of ‘overcoming’ those conflicts to produce consensus. And in the climate change context, Willis (2020) shows how citizens’ assemblies similarly do not need to be designed to pursue consensus or ignore conflict but precisely to channel and clarify the stakes in dealing with climate change, and often exist precisely in the context of ongoing contestation such as via Extinction Rebellion (XR).

One of Mouffe’s (and others’) claims is that we currently exist in a ‘post-political’ world: That is, that political life is being organized institutionally so as to suture over conflicts, to govern on the basis of a claimed consensus over the basic norms and practices of governance. For Mouffe, the rise of both fundamentalisms and authoritarian right-wing politics is intimately connected to this hegemonic centrim: Marginalized groups, having no means of institutionalized expression, turn to extremist politics in response. Swyngedouw (2010) in particular extends this logic to climate politics. He argues that climate politics is being practised in a technocratic and market-centred fashion that presents it as if there are no fundamental conflicts entailed involved in dealing with climate change.

This focus on conflict at the heart of climate politics is an important insight. Of course, we can readily find lots of analyses of specific conflicts in climate politics. There are conflicts over (and extensive academic analysis of): North–South inequalities; between fossil fuel companies and a range of activists; climate denial; between key countries in negotiations; or the injustices and adequacy of carbon markets; and contradictions between government claims about acting on climate while continuing to allow high-carbon development. The ideas of Machin, Swyngedouw, and others provide additional reasons for wanting to think about political conflict as an inherent dynamic in climate change politics.

**2.2.2 Politics As Multidimensional**

We do not need to choose between these three ways of thinking about politics, as we try to conceptualize climate change politically. Rather, since all three contain important elements of how we routinely think about politics, all three need to be kept in play in order to analyse it. For example, if we only think about sites and processes of collective decision-making, as does much of the literature on climate
change policy and governance (with some honourable exceptions such as Bulkeley 2016 or Willis 2020), we often end up with rather anodyne, functionalist, ‘apolitical’ accounts of how such governance may be improved. The vast literature on the UNFCCC, for example, almost all falls into this trap (but for exceptions, see e.g. Paterson 1996; Ciplet et al. 2015), and even where power is taken seriously, the over-riding goal is to use this insight to understand how to make international climate governance ‘better’ (e.g. Victor 2004, 2011). Even if we understand such sites as intrinsically antagonistic, as does for example Hulme (2010) in his influential Why We Disagree about Climate Change, to focus as he does on the sources of these disagreements without honing in also on the question of power relations – how for example we disagree about climate change not only because of different value systems but because climate change in some senses is a form of violence being done by some people against others – is to miss an important component of politics in general but particularly regarding climate change. Conversely, however, if we restrict our analysis to the operations of power, which is less often done but can be found for example in some work using notions of governmentality (Paterson and Stripple 2010, for example, might fall into this trap), we risk reducing climate governance to rather smooth, technical affairs.

Of particular importance to illustrating this point is Harriet Bulkeley’s (2016) book Accomplishing Climate Governance. As Bulkeley states, there is plenty of work about climate change’s politics but ‘for the most part, climate change is treated as an object, a biophysical condition, to which various social entities – actors, institutions, policies – respond’. Instead, we need to shift our ‘attention . . . to the ways in which climate change comes to be made political and how, in turn, political conditions are made in relation to climate change’ (Bulkeley 2016: 2–3).

Bulkeley, however, shifts attention quickly to the question of governance. She concedes that there are other ‘sets of political conditions to which climate change gives rise’ such as ‘violence, security and conflict’ (2016: 3) but nevertheless this focus on governance risks limiting the account of the ways in which climate change is political. In focusing the attention on how governance is ‘accomplished’, which Bulkeley does through an interrogation of different modes of authorization, or how authority is generated through the activity of attempting to govern climate change, the principal effect is to privilege analytically the process of the ‘orchestration of distinct modes of power’, that is the activity of those seeking to govern, make rules, allocate resources, and so on. It is not that other dimensions of politics (conflict, notably, to take her point above) are ignored in the analysis but they are treated as secondary to the primary focus on governing.

There has been a recent spate of interest in emphasizing the political qualities of climate change, focused on how it is structured as a conflict of interest and power between organized groups seeking to affect public policy (Breetz et al. 2018;
Sovacool and Brisbois 2019; Colgan et al. 2020; Mildenberger 2020; Stokes 2020). This literature combines the three elements of politics articulated in Section 2.2.1, roughly by assuming (although rarely expressed this explicitly) that politics is a power struggle between organized groups seeking to influence authoritative decision-making by the state. In addition, the playing field is understood as skewed in favour of incumbent, fossil fuel interests. These provide excellent insights and keep all three elements in how we think about politics in play. Nevertheless, these accounts are highly actor-focused, and can be usefully extended by considering not only the actors and their agential power (incumbent groups vs. others) but also by thinking about the overall structure within which they operate – capitalism – and the cultural dimensions which enable their power. Put differently, they have unnecessarily limited the account of the political to that of the authoritative decision-making forum of the state (at various levels) and the attempts to seek that. In Section 2.2.5 I develop this point by introducing cultural political economy as a way to include these sorts of analyses but go beyond them in a way that will become clear in the empirical analyses.

2.2.3 Depoliticization and Repoliticization

Two things flow from how I have developed the notion of climate politics so far. The first of these are the notions of depoliticization and repoliticization. These are important processes in climate politics that we will see at various points throughout the book. They can be usefully understood as logically entailed in the three-fold account of politics developed so far. Barry’s (2002) ‘The Anti-Political Economy’ is particularly useful. In this context, depoliticization refers then to the way in which actors manage to take decisions out of the realm of collective decisions being made within deliberative, public processes. The ‘politics’ in depoliticization is politics-as-arena. In the context of climate policy and politics, that usually means to take them in a technical and/or economistic setting, where experts decide on appropriate means of governing a problem. This sort of depoliticization normally therefore entails a rhetoric that climate change is a technical question, that climate policy will benefit everyone, and that ignores questions of power and conflict.3 That is, depoliticization is a political strategy in terms of politics-as-power. It is a strategy of those seeking to maintain or change the distribution of power within society. Conversely, repoliticization is in part a reversal – it seeks explicitly to bring climate change squarely into the realm of democratic decision-making – but

3 Of course such depoliticization could occur in other ways, for example when theocratic authorities are able to regulate on the basis of some claim to enacting God’s will, or in the recurrent appeals in environmental discourse to ‘nature’ as a source of authority. Such a move can clearly be seen as a strategy of power to take decisions out of a public, political arena.
it almost always also entails emphasizing that power relations are important, that incumbent forces need to be challenged, and understands conflict as central to climate change action.

It is not however simply that depoliticization is ‘bad’ and repoliticization is ‘good’. It is more that we should assume that there is a dialectic between the two. Depoliticization is central to the arguments in climate policy debates to seek ‘climate policy stability’ (e.g. Rosenbloom et al. 2019), i.e. to think about policy and institutional dynamics that make policy reversibility difficult. This may indeed be a valuable part of promoting climate action. Nevertheless, even if climate advocates may reasonably seek to depoliticize, Barry (2002) argues that depoliticization, over time at least, usually fails. In one of the examples he discusses, air pollution from vehicle exhausts has been dealt with by a series of technical regulatory fixes – banning lead from petrol, catalytic converters, annual emission inspections, and so on – but actors end up being able to repoliticize questions of air quality and car exhausts, because despite all these technical fixes, air quality remains very poor. The dynamics of climate change seem to me frequently to have this sort of quality, so this conceptualization of politics is particularly fruitful. We will see this dynamic unfold in a number of contexts throughout this book.

2.2.4 Tensions in the Politics of Climate Change: Purification vs. Complexity

The second arises out a desire to identify a singular ‘solution’ to climate change. As I hinted in Chapter 1, you don’t have to delve too hard in climate change to find propositions that simplify the question of climate change to a single cause, characteristic, and corresponding solution. For some economists, ‘getting a price on carbon’ will magically solve it. For some engineers or techno-enthusiasts, a specific technology, be it wind, nuclear, energy efficiency, battery storage, thorium, or something else, will do the job. For misanthropic Malthusians, get human numbers down, and problem solved. I call these approaches ‘purifications’ rather than simplifications because it seems to me they not only are over-simplistic (even though they are) but they rely on the specific reduction of a hugely complex set of questions surrounding climate change into a singular solution – they purify it of its complexities.4

4 I recognize that ‘purification’ has all sorts of other connotations – religious, racist, etc. – and I absolutely do not seek to attach these associations to those I critique here, although, to be fair, lots of Malthusians focused on human population are at least implicitly racist, and sometimes explicitly, as in the famous case of Garrett Hardin (see Mildenberger 2019). I struggled for the right word to capture what I am describing here. Conversely, ‘simplification’ doesn’t really capture the process of abstracting from complexity I think is going on when people seek their preferred silver bullet to solve climate change. And it is somewhat too dismissive: There can be strategic value in some forms of purification.
These examples – technology, prices, population – are all purifications that are depoliticizing. They can often be seen precisely to arise out of the cultural political economy dynamics discussed in Section 2.2.5. Economists proposing that ‘getting the prices right’ will solve the climate problem reflect the hegemonic ideology of neoliberal capitalism fairly evidently. They share with technology-boosters the (mostly unacknowledged) recognition of the stickiness of daily practices and the difficulty of such social change combined with the unquestioned normative value of unrestrained capital accumulation, and seek simple ‘silver bullet’ solutions as a work-around. Population fetishists rarely explicitly share Malthus’ open hostility to the poor but nevertheless simplify the problem to one of poor people having too many children, and depoliticize in the process.

But not all purifications are depoliticizing. The accounts of climate politics as agonistic are themselves forms of purification, or at the very least risk it. A number of scholars have started to analyse climate change politics by insisting on its agonistic character, and indeed at times insist on the necessity of taking sides in the struggle that entails. They have attempted to make arguments seeking to repoliticize climate change (e.g. Goeminne 2013; Kenis and Mathijs 2014; Pepermans and Maeseele 2016). Mann and Wainwright are perhaps the most explicit in this regard: ‘our goal is to make climate more political’ (Mann and Wainwright 2018: xii). Agreed. In doing so they articulate more explicitly than any other literature on climate change what they mean by the term politics (see notably Swyngedouw 2010; Machin 2013; MacGregor 2014; Rice 2016; Connolly 2017; Mann and Wainwright 2018). Often, this narrative is married to an explicitly anti-capitalist vision (e.g. Wall 2020).

Following this logic, many climate justice movements, such as for divestment or in XR, purify climate change to a Manichaean struggle between ‘fossil fuels and humanity’, often relying explicitly on a war metaphor to sustain this narrative (Mangat et al. 2018). In climate movements, a slogan often circulates, a quote from the American anarchist Utah Phillips: ‘The earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses’ (see e.g. Climate and Capitalism 2009). And a good deal of the literature on the relationship between capitalism and climate change poses the question as a stark ‘capitalism vs. the climate’ question, or in Malm’s pithy phrase, ‘the enemy is fossil capital’ (Malm 2020, 15). Capitalism is framed in these approaches variously as the cause of climate change, needing to be transcended to address climate change but there is also often a sense that once we have eco-socialism or something like it, solving climate change will become immediately easier: At the very least this is the case implicitly, in that such writers don’t really discuss explicitly why the structure of such societies might actually enable them to decarbonize effectively.
My point is not that these arguments are ‘wrong’, and indeed it is precisely that they contain a very important set of insights. Rather that there seems to me to be a recurrent tension in climate politics between these attempts to repoliticize climate change, to frame it as a power struggle between various opposing forces (fossil fuels vs. humanity, neoliberalism vs. democracy, rich higher emitters vs. climate vulnerable, and so on), and the messy complexity of the high-carbon world as a socio-technical system (e.g. Hoffmann 2011; Levin et al. 2012; Bernstein and Hoffmann 2018). Machin (2013) and Swyngedouw (2010) seem to me to ignore this latter dynamic, which involves thinking about the concrete interventions involved in the pursuit of decarbonization occurring at myriad scales, by diverse actors with their own logics, in ways that make identification of an ‘enemy’ or a single effective site of struggle, rather difficult. The political logic of climate change understood in terms of complexity is, in Harriet Bulkeley’s (2016) words, one of ‘accomplishing’ – patient, inventive, experimental, determined, anything but ‘heroic’. I call this a ‘purification vs. complexity’ argument.

Insisting on the agonistic qualities of climate politics is a useful counterpoint to Bulkeley’s account of climate governance as something that is ‘accomplished’ (as opposed perhaps to say ‘implemented’). Her account reminds us usefully that paying attention to how power is mobilized and effected (not just ‘who has it’) in climate politics is important. In her words, for at least some aspects of climate politics: ‘this is not the politics of vested interests and decision points, but a slow burning, unfolding, enveloping and ongoing form of the working of power’ (Bulkeley 2019, 14). But there does not need to be the choice that she presents here – rather, it is both the ‘politics of vested interests . . .’ and the ‘slow burning, unfolding . . .’ that help us understand the dynamics. Purification and complexity, not or: We do not need to choose between them but rather to consider how we keep both in play. Purification has clearly been highly important in mobilizing movements around specific aspects of the climate problem, and sharpens our focus on some of the key actors blocking change. And focusing on the complex and messy dynamics of decarbonizing the food system, or concrete, without considering the power relations and conflicts of interest, risks being a more complex form of depoliticizing technocratic governance.

2.2.5 Shaping Climate Change Action: Cultural Political Economy

These dynamics of depoliticization and repoliticization, purification and complexity, remain rather abstractly understood. We need also to ask questions of the sorts of specific forces that drive forwards and block climate action. If we do so, then my response is the following: Low carbon transitions and the conflicts they generate are driven by the interrelated dynamics of capital accumulation on the one
hand and the subjectivities that generate desires for the objects and practices that generate that accumulation on the other. In other words, in terms of the way I would use the term cultural political economy (see Paterson 2007; cf. Best and Paterson 2010; Sum and Jessop 2013). This is perhaps easiest to see in relation to forces opposing low carbon transitions: Incumbent economic interests such as coal and oil companies seeking to shore up their assets and business models to enable continued capital accumulation on the one hand, and powerful emotional forces around practices such as driving, flying, meat-eating, or air conditioning that produce cultural resistance to low carbon transitions. These are not reducible to each other, and thus arguments focused solely on corporate power and strategy (e.g. Mildenberger 2020; Stokes 2020) only address half the problem. But these same types of forces drive forward climate policy, whether relatively minor (in the ‘emissions’ frame) or more transformational: Those climate policies that have gained traction have done so because sufficient numbers of businesses have seen an investment opportunity to support them, and because of cultural valuing of those novel directions for society. Part of this cultural valuing for some people may be because they value addressing climate change per se, but climate-related motivations are rarely if ever sufficient to drive responses forward, and at least they need to be articulated with an excitement for specific low carbon practices and the sort of social change they enable. The final thing to say about this cultural political economy perspective is that it implies that there are always profound legitimacy challenges for decarbonization. The processes and politics of accumulation are themselves always contested (this is intrinsic to power relations in capitalist society), and this is the case with capital-centred responses to climate change. This means that there are often similarities in the way that low carbon projects and high-carbon projects are contested. Carbon markets have been subject to acute legitimacy challenges for precisely these reasons and are perhaps the most crudely ‘capitalist’ responses to climate change, creating new, financial commodities whose relation to actual processes of decarbonization is tenuous at best (Newell and Paterson 2010; Paterson 2010a). But even more substantive low carbon trajectories have similar political dynamics: Objections to wind turbines and objections to fracking by social movements frequently take more or less the same form, and adopt the same rhetoric, and this is largely because those projects are driven by the pursuit of private capital accumulation.

Another way to understand this is to think of it in terms of the framework of ‘devices, desires and dissent’ that Harriet Bulkeley, Johannes Stripple, and I developed (Bulkeley et al. 2016). That is, climate politics can be seen in the complex relations between: The devices we use in daily life, the complex systems those devices make up, and the devices by which we are governed; the desires for those devices as well as in relation to climate change itself; and the dissent that
generates mobilization over climate change but also over the attempts to shift our use of specific devices in low carbon directions.

The conclusion takes up the implications of these various arguments, especially in relation to anti-capitalist arguments about climate politics. In the meantime, we will encounter it playing out in various moments in the empirical story of climate politics in Ottawa as it unfolds.

### 2.3 A Summary

For the visually minded, Figure 2.1 summarizes these various elements in the arguments I develop across the book. As mentioned in Chapter 1, they are interrelated in complicated ways and the book doesn’t map them out in a linear way. But nevertheless, the lines indicate the principal ways I see the arguments connecting. Some lines have arrows only one way, implying a causal process, for example how the dynamics of accumulation explain why some actors seek to purify and depoliticize climate change, while others have arrows at both ends, implying basic features or processes that mutually constitute or shape each other. Some arrows are missing, implying I don’t see important connections: You may get to the end of the book of course and disagree with me on this!

![Processes in climate politics](https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108974912.004)