

Constructing an illegitimate opponent

A post-political, critical, discourse analysis regarding environmental activism in Sweden

Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate the contemporary discourse on environmental activism in Sweden on a political elite level. This is done by analyzing statements by politicians behind “Tidöavtalet” using a method of Critical Discourse Analysis combined with a theoretical departure in Post-Politics. The findings point towards a discourse where environmental activists are depoliticized and constructed as an illegitimate political actor through a securitization process where activists and activist groups are depicted as opposing democratic values. In this process, other civil-society actors are also constructed as being outside of the legitimate political sphere. The analysis further showcases how post-political dynamics manifests in the contemporary political debate, embedded in an overarching discourse characterized by neoliberal values such as technical innovation and elite rule.

Keywords: Environmental activism, discourse, post-politics, Sweden

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1. Introduction

Since 2018 we have seen a rise in environmental and climate activism throughout large parts of the world (Parks et al., 2023). In this rise, sometimes referred to as the “fourth wave of climate activism”, newly founded groups such as Fridays for Future (FFF), Extinction Rebellion (XR) and a more recent Swedish-based example Återställ Våtmarker (ÅV) have been leading the way. Since 2018 they have consistently made the headlines with everything from demonstrations, world-wide school strikes, debate articles and actions of civil disobedience (Parks et al., 2023. p.102). All of this for the purpose of raising the question on the agenda, pushing politicians to act and to build a strong movement within the public opinion.

The response from civil society as well as politicians may have been varying since the start, nevertheless the movement has gained many important achievements and milestones along the way, such as frontrunner Greta Thunberg being invited to address world leaders at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit. However, human rights organizations and several scholars argue that the responses from politicians world wide have taken a turn in the most recent years, where they warn of a growing repression of activists (Lakhani, Gayle & Taylor. 2023; Szalai, 2022. p.31). This global trend seems to follow a pattern of intensified critique against environmental activists in the medial debate, where politicians frame activists as threatening, anti-democratic and sometimes even as terrorists (Szalai, 2022. p.32; Mireanu, 2014). Simultaneously, and in conjunction with the increased critique, a development of increased criminalisation and persecution from state actors as well as private and corporate interests have been documented (Hasler, Walters, & White. 2019).

With this background I seek to investigate the phenomenon in the case of Sweden, as few studies have examined environmental activism in Sweden from a post-structuralist, discursive perspective. I intend to fill this research gap, by mapping out and critically analyzing the discourse around environmental activism in Sweden. By extension, I thus also seek to contribute

with a piece to the puzzle of understanding the contemporary politics of climate change (Teorell & Svensson, 2007. p.18).

In summary, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the currently ruling politicians in Sweden are constructing the image of the environmental movement in Sweden. To reach this objective, I deploy Fairclough's methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in a combination with a theoretical departure in post-politics, making use of key theoretical concepts in the analysis. I thus follow the arguing of a post structuralist school of thought, assuming that the discursive aspect plays a major role in shaping our understanding of the world, and that discourse stands in a dialectical relationship to social reality, thus both reflecting the social world as well as constructing it. Lastly, this thesis is written on the basis that contemporary environmental politics itself cannot be understood unless we analyze and recognize the importance of discourses together with relations of power.

1.1 Research purpose and question(s)

Against this background, the objective of this thesis is to critically examine the public discourse regarding the recent wave of environmental activism on a political elite level. It also aims to further analyze how post-political tendencies are used to construct the discursive image of activism and environmental politics. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How are policymakers in Sweden constructing the image of environmental activism?

RQ2: How are post-political dynamics manifesting in policymakers' construction of environmental activism?

RQ3: Which overarching discourses can be found regarding environmental politics?

1.2 Definitions

The definition of the environmental activist groups in the scope of this thesis is based on that of Schlosberg & Coles (2015). That is, a collective body sprung out of civil society engaging in carrying out alternatives to dominant socio economic practices with a primary focus on moving towards a sustainable materialism and changing the material relationship between humans, other beings, and the non-human realm (ibid.). Within this broad definition I have chosen a few groups that are to be seen as representative of this so-called fourth wave of activism. The chosen groups are: FFF, XR and ÅV, (see 2.2 for a further elaboration on the groups). Furthermore, this thesis will refer to the activist groups as “environmentalists” or “environmental activists”, even though it might be seen as problematic to define them in that sense, since FFF tends to focus mainly on climate change for example. I have chosen this term over “climate”, since the “environment” can be defined as the entirety of the global ecosystem, and thus also the climate (Sintef.no). Moreover, as pointed out by Grasso & Giugni (2022), the environmental movement has mobilized through the question of the climate - since the interlinkage of climate and environment is hard to divide (Grasso & Giugni, 2022. p.28). Other scholars writing on climate and environmental activism have simply referred to them as “green activist” (Heyes & King, 2018)

The politicians whose statements are the basis of the analysis are defined as politicians representing the parties currently holding government. Meaning the parties behind "Tidöavtalet" - Moderaterna, Liberalerna, Kristdemokraterna and Sverigedemokraterna. Sverigedemokraterna, though not formally being in government, is included, since they have had an influence in the policy making by being a supporting party and hence also are responsible for Sweden's climate and environmental politics.

2. Background

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the history and role of environmental activism through the decades. Using Parks et. al (2023) categorization of “waves” of activism departing from the late nineteenth hundreds, seeking to map out distinct characteristics of the evolution of

the movements leading up to our present day, referred to as the “fourth wave”. Lastly, this chapter will provide an overview of the contemporary repression of environmental activism around the world.

2.1 Environmental activism - a historical overview

The history of environmentalism in the Global North began in the late nineteenth century (Parks et al., 2023. p.100). This initial wave was primarily shaped by a conservationist perspective, focusing mainly on preserving natural habitats, saving flora and fauna from extinction, and protecting spaces seen as “pristine”. This led to the creation of national parks and other protected areas to ensure that nature remained undisturbed by human interaction. During this period, conservationism was largely viewed as something apolitical. However, this perspective often served as a justification for displacing indigenous peoples and local communities and thus being something highly political (ibid.). This stream of ideas primarily aimed at preserving nature through a process of exotification, inventing an idea of what wilderness is, that catered mainly to a white upper class working within the socio-political order (Carter, 2018. p.150).

In the 1960s however, a wave of social justice movements emerged and spread throughout the Global North, significantly influencing the political landscape as we know it today. These movements, including student, peace, feminist, anti-nuclear, civil rights, and black resistance movements, positioned themselves outside the established political parties characterized by traditional left-right politics concerned with classical material issues such as economic growth, national security, and unemployment (Carter, 2018. p.91). These diverse movements were successful in raising their specific concerns on the political agenda by mobilizing people outside of parliamentary politics and thus politicizing questions previously viewed as non-political (ibid.). Arguably, it is during this period that we find the roots of the environmental movement we know today, as it connected the environmental question with issues of social justice and the capitalist economic system (Rootes, 2003. p.1). Additionally, it was during this time that more disruptive protest methods were employed as political tools. As environmentalists often aligned with broader leftist movements using inventive tactics, different groups inspired and learned

from each other, utilizing tactics such as demonstrations, civil disobedience, and various forms of direct action (Parks et al., 2023. p.100).

The revolutionary movement of the 1960s underwent a transformation over time, shifting the focus to work within the existing system rather than changing it. According to Carter (2018), this transformation can be seen as a materialization of how the former revolutionary groups evolved into a more pragmatic reformist character (Carter, 2018. p.90). Furthermore, this shift played an important role in laying the foundation for the institutionalization of environmental politics as well as the “green parties”, that are now an integral part of party politics in many industrialized liberal societies of the Global North (Carter, 2018. p.86). The revolutionary seeds of the 1960s not only contributed to the introduction of the environment as a political issue in national and international politics. The movement also transformed and branched out into the creation of several NGOs that are still working on building public opinion, though from a more institutionalized approach, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth (Carter, 2018. p.151).

Following the waves, environmental engagement has changed a lot over the last century. From the first conservationist elite, onto the second wave, set forth by the revolutionaries of the 1960s, to the third wave, marked by an institutionalization of environmental politics. The fourth, which falls within the scope of this thesis, is characterized by the return to the critical voices of the second wave, where environmental activists once again highlight the need to challenge the political status quo. The following chapter further elaborates on the fourth wave, and its political standpoints.

2.2 A fourth wave

The “fourth wave” is largely characterized by a return to the second wave’s questioning of the current political and economic system as sufficient enough to resolve the environmental and climate crisis. Additionally linking questions of the environment to aspects of socio-economic justice as well as other questions regarding social justice (Parks et al., 2023. p.102). As time wore on from the institutionalization period of environmental politics, the failure of said institutions and governments became increasingly clear (ibid.). In this increasing frustration, a

rise of social movement activism was once again back in fashion, starting off in the 2000s with large scale demonstrations, such as during the Copenhagen UNFCCC COP (ibid.). Even though no clear line can be drawn between the start and end of the periods, the school strikes initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018 are considered highly influential. The actions of Thunberg quickly spread and soon youths around the world engaged in acts of disobedience by leaving their schools and protesting for the sake of their future (Grasso & Giugni, 2022. p.28). According to De Moor et al. (2020), the groups emerging out of this new wave have some distinct features to them. Firstly, they have managed to mobilize a historically large number of people, consisting largely of people who have not been politically active before. Secondly, actions of disobedience are used to a seemingly higher degree than during the third wave. Thirdly, the groups' primary focus is to affect their national governments, in contrast to the third wave's focus on affecting transnational institutions or companies. Fourth, the groups focus heavily on science, demanding that policymakers listen to the expertise of natural scientists regarding environmental and climate degradation (De Moor et al., 2020). The groups selected for this study; FFF, XR and ÅV, belong to this categorization of groups.

In addition to these groups demanding that politicians act upon the calls made from the academic community, they lay out further objectives. Both XR and ÅV emphasize a deeper form of democracy as a part of their solution, presenting visions where citizens partake in grassroots democracy to ensure the people's influence on their own lives and the environment around them. In this understanding, representative liberal democracy is viewed as inadequate. Hence, they resist the political and economical status quo through mobilizing outside of ordinary party politics (Schlosberg & Coles, 2015.). On their websites, they describe their objectives as follows:

XR: "Citizens' assemblies (CAs) aim to give greater political power to citizens. Members of the public who accurately represent those living in the country make up the assembly..."

"A functioning democracy should enable voters to decide the direction in which their country moves. In theory, if citizens are not happy with this direction, they can vote for change. In practice, however, democratic governments favour solving short-term problems that ensure their popularity. Governments bury difficult, controversial, or long-term issues, such as the climate and ecological crisis. Setting up a citizens'

assembly addresses this problem: if the pressure of a citizens' assembly is larger than the pressure of a government's supporters and funders, action on climate change might be possible. The open discussion of this huge and complicated issue can finally happen in a constructive and fair way” - (rebellion.global, 2021)

ÅV: “We will not make demands on the government anymore. We will listen and discuss with individual politicians but do not put faith in the parliamentary political system. We complement our banners with the text "We are democracy" to educate and create public opinion around the political breakdown and the democracy issue So Restore Wetlands is now an activist democracy movement in parallel with being a resistance movement fighting for our survival. With Citizens' Councils and People's Councils, we are creating a stronger democracy together” - (återställvåtmarker.se, 2024)

FFF stands out from XR and ÅV in the sense that the organization has a more narrowly defined ideological framework and presents its demands in forms of bullet points, accepted in 2019. However, the organization still claims to strive for a more just society parallel to the demands of action and listening to science. The demands are presented as follows: *1. Create a safe pathway under 1.5C. 2. Climate justice and equity for everyone. 3. Follow the Paris Agreement. 4. Unite behind the science.* (fridaysforfuture.org, 2019).

To summarize, the activists of the fourth wave have turned to some of the tactics used by the revolutionaries in the 1960s, utilizing blockades, civil disobedience, and demonstrations to impact the politicians in power. They have managed to mobilize vast numbers of people of all ages and backgrounds with the demands that politicians take more drastic action. They also, to some extent, advocate for a different form of democracy, one in which they envision power to be moved from a political elite to the people they are said to represent. They thus go beyond the strict ecological question of the environment as an isolated question and call for not only climate or environmental justice but social justice as well (Grasso & Giugni, 2022. p.29).

2.3 Repression of activism

As previously mentioned, climate and environmental activist movements are facing a broader pattern of criminalization, prosecution and repression throughout the world. However this is not something entirely new. In large parts of what is often referred to as the Global South, environmental defenders have met ferocious aggression in conflicts often concerning the defense

of land and local ecosystems from different extractivist activities (Billon & Lujala, 2020). The aggressors have taken the shape of both state and non-state actors, which have resulted in the numerous activists losing their lives throughout the years (ibid.). In the Global North on the other hand, the forms of repression have not reached such severity (ibid.), but rather taken the shape of criminalization, where state actors implement new legislations and tools for enforcement agencies to counteract the activists (Hasler, Walters & White., 2019). As in the case of Sweden, activists have in the last couple of years been prosecuted and in some cases convicted of sabotage (Sveriges Domstolar, 2022). In addition to this, scholars within different fields of social science suggest that non-legal forms of repression against environmental activists are common in the Global North (see, for example: Reyes & Gertz, 2023; Earl, Maher & Pan, 2022). Lastly, this thesis does not aim to investigate the issue on a global scale, but in the case of Sweden, which is situated in the Global North. Hence, the literature used primarily focuses on the environmental movement from a Global North perspective and should not be seen as representing the total history of environmentalism or even representative for contemporary environmentalism on a global level.

3. Previous research

The following section strives to give a review of the existing academic literature related to the focus of this thesis. Partly to provide an elaborated context to the reader on the current debate within academia and partly to motivate chosen study objective, method and theory to insure the academic relevance of the thesis. As this thesis aims to critically explore how policymakers frame environmental activism with the use of post political theory, the following subsections will address research on the political discourse regarding activism and elaborate on the usage of post political theory within political science.

3.1 Environmental Activism

The research on environmental activism is quite extensive and spread around various different focuses. Neas et al. (2022), provide an overview on the methodological trends and themes in the current academic literature regarding the topic of this fourth wave of environmental activism. Method-wise, an overall trend of studying the activists themselves is noted. Scholars tend to utilize qualitative methods consisting of interviews, textual analysis and different ethnographic approaches, which are mainly concerned with the activists themselves, how they view their own movement, their future, and the crisis at hand (Neas et al., 2022; Bond et al., 2020). When it comes to textual analysis scholars have focused more on the framing of this movement, often using material from newspaper articles. However, the textual approach also seems rather concerned with understanding the activists themselves, using diverse materials such as newspaper articles, tweets, social media posting and television and to a seemingly unproportionate extent analyzing speeches by Greta Thunberg (Neas et al., 2022). Although analysis regarding the framing of activists is quite common, it seems like studying the topic from a critical power perspective focusing on policymakers is not as common, leaving room for further research.

3.2 Political discourse – environmental activism

According to Farah Zaman (2021), the discursive analysis of climate change and environmental politics have attracted increasing attention within the academic community. However, as Zaman stresses, only within a limited scale (Zaman, 2021). The scarcity surrounding the topic of political discourse and environmental activism is furthermore highlighted in Cunningham et al.'s (2022) research, which takes its starting point in an eco-linguistic approach to the subject. They investigate the discourse from the two contesting camps – activists and politicians. Their findings suggest that the activists mainly focus on an anthropocentric view on the topic, recognizing human interaction with the environment as a key problem. Politicians on the other hand tend not to frame human interaction as a cause of the problem at all, and rather talk about industry, finance, politics and economy (Cunningham et al., 2022). Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction, both scholars and human rights organizations have pointed to a hardened rhetoric in

the public political discourse in recent years. They have also observed increased legal and non-legal repercussions for activists around the world. On this topic, Szalai (2022), presents a theory of social control regarding political discourse. Sprung from a cultural criminologist perspective, Szalai stresses the use of language as an informal form of criminalization through their research, providing insights on how power dynamics and discourses can be used as an effective tool of controlling the population (Szalai, 2022. p.32). Furthermore, Szalai specifically argues that this form of social control is tangibly deployed against the contemporary environmental movements (ibid.). Fritsch & Kretschmann (2021), elaborates on this informal criminalization and argues that there is a tendency within neoliberal societies to evolve towards an overall securitization of potential threats to the state (Fritsch & Kretschmann, 2021. p.22). This securitization applies to most opponents of the status quo, and hence the environmental movement with its demands on a deeper form of democracy, economic- and social change (ibid.).

Since it is widely recognized within the social sciences that civil society and activism play an important role in shaping political outcomes and have acted as a counterweight against a status quo throughout the history of liberal democracies (Hasler, Walters & White. 2019). I see it as important for academia to keep investigating the subject. With this as a starting point, I aim to contribute and build upon this strain of research, recognizing organizations within civil society as important political actors, and thus seeing the discourse surrounding them as important to map out and analyze.

3.3 The post-political

The use of post-politics in analyzing climate and environmental politics has been done for some time. For example with scholars such as Swyngedouw making use of the framework to demonstrate the effects of a neoliberal hegemony on contemporary environmental politics. Swyngedouw's work illustrates how concepts such as “sustainable development” and “environment” become empty signifiers under the post-political era. These concepts lose their meaning and political nature, resulting in a continual status quo (Swyngedouw, 2011. p.254, 272)

(see also 4.1 post-politics). Others have used the theory to analyze the characteristics of the environmental activist movement, pointing towards an inner struggle within the environmental activist groups themselves (De Moor, Catney & Doherty, 2019). Such studies have concluded that some environmental activist movements have moved away from a critique of an unsustainable economic system driving climate and environmental degradation, and towards a more individualistic focus on the consumer within the framework of neoliberal capitalism. In this way, the environmental activists themselves are seen as shifting towards accepting a post-political approach to their struggle, by not opposing the system but trying to reform it from within (ibid.). Carter (2018) also observes this phenomenon from a historical perspective, although not employing the theory or post-politics. Carter exemplifies this by looking at the green radical mass movements of the 1960s which stood in opposition to the mainstream ideology of economic growth, represented by both capital, labor, and traditional party-politics. These movements later transformed their positions during the decades into a more reformist-like stance with close connections to political parties (Carter, 2018. p.91). Other scholars, such as Blühdorn & Deflorian (2021), view the environmental activist movements through a post-political understanding as a potential re-politicising factor, possibly contributing to an end of the post-political condition. They argue that we are now witnessing a wave of social movements, similar to the revolutionary movements of the 60s and that these movements are in the process of creating a new political climate; reinserting a political dimension into the environment issue (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2021.). With this background, and by seeing the political as a struggle between hegemonies, and between what is allowed fit within the political, I aim to use post-political theory to understand the current political debate regarding environmental activism in Sweden.

4. Theoretical framework

This chapter addresses the theoretical approaches of this thesis. Firstly it provides an overview of the theoretical departure of post politics, outlining key concepts and how they will benefit the analysis. Secondly, the core theoretical aspects of CDA are discussed. Notably, CDA should be

viewed as theory *and* method, whereas the theoretical underpinnings are reviewed in this chapter and the methodological dimensions are presented in section 5.1.

4.1 Post-Politics

The exact meaning of post politics is debated, since it has emerged from a broad range of scholars using different definitions with varied focal points (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015. p.6). Overall, the term refers to a political condition of neoliberal dominance. This is described as a condition where *the political* is depoliticized to the degree that the envision of a different world outside of the ruling socio- economic system is rendered impossible (ibid.). Some scholars describe this as the political being infested and replaced by “politics”. These similar terms have two very different meanings in post political theory, where the *political* is described as a space of agonistic engagement, contestation, and a struggle between legitimate counterparts where real political alternatives are provided. *Politics* on the other hand is understood as a stalled political condition of a cemented neoliberalism, technocracy, economic growth, and consensus that operates within an unquestionable framework of free markets and representative democracy (ibid.). A result of this condition is that the expansion of capitalism rarely appears as a political project "but rather as the result of some kind of (super)natural law or logic" (Teschfahoney and Dahlstedt 2008, s. 13). Hence, as no alternatives can be imagined in a post-political condition, political issues are perceived as matters for experts and elites to solve. Potential outcomes are narrowed in advance leading to a form of governance by elites, rather than viewing societal problems as the results of political ideology (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015. p.6). According to post-political theorists, this not only diminishes the possibilities for varied political outcomes but also contributes to a democratic deficit as the people's choices of potential change is restricted (Mouffe, 2019. p.15). Furthermore, Mouffe (2019) argues that this paralyzed state of neoliberalism results in perfect conditions for the growth of far-right populist parties. In this state these parties can utilize a growing frustration and lack of trust in democratic institutions by presenting false divisions in society and then offering a false promise to give back political power to the people (Mouffe, 2019. p.15).

Since post-political theory derives from several different scholars, I consider it necessary to clarify the specific theoretical choices of this thesis. In the analysis, I mainly draw on the theorization of Chantal Mouffe and Erik Swyngedouw. I use Mouffe's elaborated focus on the distinction between *political* and *politics* as well as *agonistic* and *antagonistic* struggle, and employ Swyngedouw's work on the subject in order to center more on environmental aspects.

Mouffe, building her theorization of post-politics on a marxist analysis, emphasizes the inherent antagonistic conflicts within the capitalist system and stresses the importance of a space for conflict within a political system. She makes a distinction between an agonist and an antagonist confrontation within liberal democracy, where agonism represents a conflict between *legitimate* opponents, while antagonism on the other hand represents a conflict between enemies whose mere existence is seen as illegitimate (Mouffe, 2019. p.119). Mouffe sees the contemporary political landscape (built on a liberal hegemony), as a landscape that disregards these inherent conflicts and renders an agonistic struggle impossible. Instead, ideals based on “dialogue”, “compromise”, “consensus” and “deliberation” are seen as the only way forward (Mouffe, 2008. p.10). The result of these ideals within a neoliberal hegemony is that the political debate only allows for certain types of ideas and ideologies, transforming the political into *politics*, and makes political alternatives outside this discourse impossible, as they are met with an antagonistic approach. This undermines the democratic ideal that the power lies in the hands of the people, as different political outcomes are rendered impossible. Or, as Mouffe expresses it in her own words: “*Today's politics therefore is only about managing the established order, a task best assigned to experts*” (Ibid., p. 31). To conclude, the post-political condition is considered to result in a depoliticization of political questions as the contemporary economic and political condition is seen as inescapable. Further, no meaningful alternatives can be presented since agonistic struggle is dismissed as antagonistic.

Swyngedouw deploys this theoretical framework with a focus on the domain of environmental politics, highlighting how there is a large consensus within contemporary politics regarding the severity of the situation of environmental and climate degradation (Swyngedouw, 2011). Swyngedouw points towards how politicians and natural scientists often stress the emergency of the situation, which results in a fear-driven, apocalyptic discourse around the subject, while

adequate political action remains largely absent (ibid.). In this discourse, Swyngedouw reveals a political paradox in the post political condition, stating that the global capitalist system clearly drives the degradation which is the basis of the fear, and that still no other political alternatives than the same destructive system is presented. The only solutions which are recognised as plausible in this post-political state are changes such as private consumption behavior, technical innovation and market forces (ibid.). Furthermore, Swyngedouw argues that those who question this political status quo are portrayed as “irrational”, “irresponsible” and “ideological”. This leads to rejection from the political sphere and them being portrayed as a “noise” whose opinions are seen as illegitimate – robbing them of their political voice (Swyngedouw, 2022). Hence, Swyngedouw highlights how the question of the environment is an especially depoliticized one.

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

“For CDA, language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use powerful people make of it” (Wodak, 2001).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to expose the relationship between language, power, ideology and society (Halperin & Heath, 2017. p.338). The approach, originating from a post-structuralist school of thought, stresses the importance of language in our understanding of and access to the world. It views language not as reflecting some objective truth, but rather as reflecting the dominance of a specific way of thinking about the world (ibid.). What distinguishes CDA from other post-structuralist and social constructivists discursive practises, and what reflects the “critical” part of CDA, is the primary concern of studying and exposing how social power, dominance and inequality is constructed and maintained through language (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018). In the words of Fairclough (2015), the “critical” also means looking for the underlying *why*, meaning to search for the explanations behind the phenomenon (Fairclough, 2015. p.7). CDA assumes that powerful groups in society have an advantage through their societal positions. These positions often come with a high degree of authority, are considered trustworthy, and have an extended platform for communication, such as experts, scholars, politicians and so forth (Halperin & Heath, 2017. p.339). Making use of this power, these powerful groups gain control of the public discourse,

which in turn controls our way of thinking, and thus reproduces and maintains structures of inequality (ibid.).

Although CDA tends to focus mainly on discourses, it does not see language as the only constitutive factor. It also recognizes other forms of social practices as important, and thus see discourses as a social practice that stands in a dialectical relationship with other social practices, also referred to as social norms (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000. p.68). From a CDA-point of view discourses are therefore both reflecting the social world as well as constructing it (Fairclough 2015, p.48).

4.3 An embedded approach

In this thesis I intend to primarily use the methodological aspects of CDA combined with Mouffe's and Swyngedouw's theorization on post politics. Firstly, it's important to acknowledge, that CDA is not a distinct method in of itself, and should rather be viewed as a critical approach to a social and political context with a clear emphasis on how power relations manifests, reproduces and are legitimized through both text and speech (Tannen, et al. 2015. p.466). Meaning, that CDA is to be seen as both a theory *and* a method, as it comes with joint basic philosophical, theoretical and methodological premises which cannot be separated in any meaningful fashion, if you remove the theoretical dimension, there is not much left but a discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001. p.122). Thus a clarification on the compatibility of the theories is needed. Since both CDA and post-politics are sprung out of poststructuralist and post marxist traditions, I see them as well suited to compliment each other (Mouffe, 2019. p.13; Wodak, 2001. p.9). Secondly both theories position themselves as critical to the neoliberal capitalist system, focusing on discourses and utilizing similar theoretical concepts such as hegemony, but still with different points of view. Importantly, as stated by Fairclough (2015. p.10), it can be fruitful to combine CDA with other social theories to gain more explanatory characteristics to the analysis (Fairclough, 2015. p.10). The aim is therefore to deploy the explicitly critical approach of CDA in a combination with the more explanatory aspects of post-politics to examine and map out the political elite's discourse on environmental activism, and last but not least: to give myself an elaborated theoretical ground for the analysis.

5. Methodology

5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Having outlined the theoretical assumptions of CDA, I now turn to the methodological aspects. While there are multiple methodological approaches to CDA, I will make use of Fairclough's analytical model. The motivation behind the chosen method lies primarily in the distinctive characteristics of CDA in illuminating power relations and its focus on political discourse, together with the normative focus of the approach on social change, power and democracy (Tannen, et al., 2015. p.466). Fairclough's analytic model consists of three main components consisting of text, discursive practices and social practice, represented in figure 1. The first part of the analysis examines the different components of a text. A text refers to a communicative event, such as a speech, writing or an image. Emphasis is placed on the words used, how sentences are constructed and how they link together. The second dimension is the discursive practices, in which the production, distribution and consumption of said text is the focus. Production refers to who created the text and/or the communicative event, e.g., journalists, politicians, authors etc. The consumption of the text is centered around who the intended receiver is. In the last dimension of social practice, the text and discursive practice is placed in the wider social practice in which it is situated. In this last step, Fairclough suggests that other social theories can be complementary and useful to get a depth to the analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000. p.90).

Although CDA and post-politics are similar in many ways, I see them as complementary to each other, by using CDA's critical perspectives on power and discourse, and utilizing the methodological components alongside the more explanatory character of post-politics. With this combination, I strive to provide a fruitful analytical perspective on contemporary environmental politics.

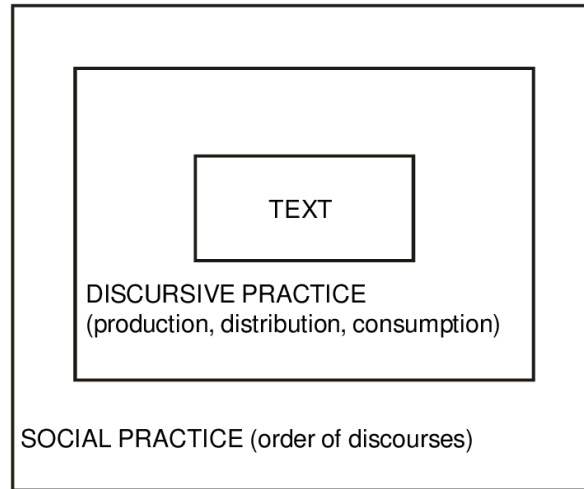


Figure 1.

Lastly, this thesis does not strive to acquire some sort of objective truth, as indicated in both 4.2 and this section, since both the characteristics of CDA and the chosen theory take a normative stance. Even though the research questions are not framed to answer how something *should be* or what is desirable or not, the purpose of CDA is in many ways to expose how power manifests and reproduces through language, which in itself is a normative position to take (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000. p.70; Boréus & Bergström, 2018. p.306-307). Thus, I position myself within the tradition of social science that considers it important for academia to be critical of society and provide material, tools and knowledge to improve society as a whole (Fairclough, 2015. p.5-6).

5.2 Material and data collection

The collection of data was conducted from a variety of sources, ranging from interviews with politicians in popular newspapers, to recorded speeches at conferences, official statements from ministers, tweets, and debate articles, with a total of 11 sources, the data collected is attached at the end of the thesis (see appendix). The material was collected using search engines on google, newspaper sites and twitter to identify where politicians mention activism and/or climate and environmental politics – aiming to include both categories. This, for the purpose of limiting the potential data to analyze and to keep the data relevant for the study subject. The motivation behind this way of collecting data is to get a wide range of texts to analyze, striving to some

extent to point towards (but not claiming to generalize) an overarching political discourse constructed by the currently ruling politicians (Fairclough, 2015. p.8).

As the process of analysis inevitably starts when the researcher comes in contact with the text, no clear line can be drawn. As emphasized by Wodak (2001), no distinct division can be made within CDA when it comes to the process of gathering material and the analysis itself (Wodak & Meyer, 2001. p.10). Hence CDA falls more in the hermeneutic rather in the analytical-deductive tradition of research. I have, in following that line, gathered my material alongside the writing of this thesis. I used the qualitative coding programme Nvivo to categorize and analyze the material. Nvivo provided a way to structure the different themes identified within the material and enabled a clear overview. In this process a few main categories were found based on the theoretical framework of post politics represented under 5.3 operationalization. As for the language of the material collected, it is mostly in Swedish. I have used the AI-tool DeepL for a primary translation of the collected data. The translations were then proofread and potential errors corrected. I am aware of the limitations this brings, since translation always comes with some loss of meaning.

Furthermore, as this is qualitative research it is important to acknowledge that I as the researcher and writer are a part of the research process (Halperin & Heath, 2017. p.357). As this is the case I strive to provide a high level of transparency regarding the material, operationalization, analysis as well as chosen method and theory - which lay the basis for the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this thesis (ibid.). Lastly, as this is a thesis based on a critical perspective it is important to acknowledge my position in regards to the study subject (Bukamal 2022). Where I position myself outside of the community which is being studied, which is of importance since I as the researcher are an active agent in the creation of the results (ibid.).

5.3 Operationalization

In the operationalization, three main categories have been identified from the theoretical framework, with two sub-categories represented in table 1. In addition to the strictly theory driven categories, some have been constructed alongside the analysis by identifying recurring

themes within the material. This process has been done through open coding, meaning that codes are based on recurring phenomena throughout the material, which is to some extent guided by theory and research questions (Denscombe, 2010. p.285). Phenomena is to be understood in this context as a kind of event, a type of action, a shade of opinions, the use of specific words or expressions or an implied meaning (ibid.).

Name	Description
(anti) Democratic behavior	Text where politicians position the actions and methods of activists in relation to democracy. Sometimes as anti-democratic, establishing what is to be seen as democratic. Example: <i>"There are certain groups that want to disrupt the democratic conversation"</i>
- Disruptive	Describing organizations and actions as disruptive and non-productive, an illegitimate voice or a disturbing "noise". Example: <i>"Which leads to anger and rejection from people affected by their actions"</i>
Establishing the real environmentalists	Ruling politicians defining themselves and the market as the "real" environmentalists. Example: <i>"And the Swedish mining industry is the most environmentally friendly in the world"</i>
Liberal Hegemony & neoliberal solutions	Referring to a political "reality" constricting the potential outcomes of political decisions. Describing free market capitalism as the (only) solution to environmental and climate degradation. Example: <i>"Through green solutions and new technologies that save the climate - but also stop the natural disasters that cause such immense human and biological suffering around the world"</i>
- Elite rule	Referring to a societal elite as the key facilitators of environmental solutions. Example: <i>"Within the framework of Fossil Free Sweden, 22 different industries under the expert leadership of Svante Axelsson have developed a way forward"</i>

Table 1.

6. Analysis

The analysis will be structured according to the three main coding categories found under operationalization. Also, the section strives to divide the analysis to answer the research questions in order, although the themes are somewhat overlapping and blending together, I have tried to do so for the sake of clarity. Firstly RQ1 will be answered under 6.1: *How are policymakers in Sweden constructing the image of environmental activism?* Followed by RQ2 under 6.2: *How are post-political dynamics manifesting in policymakers' construction of environmental activism?* And lastly RQ3 will be answered under 6.3: *Which overarching discourses can be found regarding environmental politics?* The data which the following quotes are taken from will be referred to as: Source 1 (S1), Source 2 (S2) and so on. (See appendix for the full list of sources).

6.1 (anti) Democratic Behavior

A recurring theme found in the material is the discourse around democracy. The discourse circulates both around what is seen as a democratic ideal, and what actions are to be accepted in a “democratic” society. The narration around the subject tends to place the environmental activists groups outside of the democratic sphere. A rather clear example of this is the statement by prime minister Ulf Kristersson, referring to activists engaging in what is framed as an anti-democratic practise:

“These people are trying to sabotage the democratic political processes in Sweden. Last week, the Minister for Finance, Elisabeth Svantesson, and I were in Malmö for a nice and open question time - a "Wednesday AW" - at Scandic Triangeln in Malmö” - (S2)

Here Kristersson refers to activists from the group XR called “rebellmammorna”. When referring to the group as a collective the text consists of words as ‘*sabotage*’ in relation to what is established as a ‘*democratic political process*’. Thus establishing the narrative that these groups stand in opposition to the openness of a democratic society, and that an ‘*open question time*’ represents a democratic process. In the same text Kristersson refers to climate- and environment

minister Romina Pourmokhtaris decision to cancel a climate event due to the expected presence of one person associated with the group XR (S2).

“Today, Minister for Climate and Environment Romina Pourmokhtari was due to attend an important climate event with “Fossilfritt Sverige”. But she had to cancel for security reasons linked to the group Extinction Rebellion.” - (S2)

Kristersson constructs a discourse around the activist group as being a security threat and declares that Pourmokhtari ‘had’ to cancel due to the severity of the threat – thus describing it as if she had no choice. Furthermore, Kristersson uses words such as ‘*totalitarian forces*’ when referring to the group (S2). These words are seen as a polar opposite of the ‘*open*’ liberal democratic society, portrayed as the ideal (S2). The text is mediated through Kristerssons personal instagram account, a medium where the control of the text is completely in the hands of the writer, in contrast to mediating through journalists for example. Furthermore it can be seen as a strong statement from Kristersson, choosing the medium of his own instagram profile, stating his own opinion on the question, coming from the rather powerful position as the prime minister of Sweden. Member of parliament, Fredrik Kärholm, representing Moderaterna, further constructs this image of activism as a threat via his own twitter-page. Referring to the blockade of a highway with the following text: *“Those who put other people's lives at risk to achieve a political goal are not activists. They are terrorists.” - (S4)*. Here the actions of the group ÅV is not only described as undemocratic, but deprived of the term ‘*activism*’ and classified as an act of ‘*terrorism*’. Similarly charged words can be found in a text published in the newspaper Expressen, where Martin Kinnunen and Beatrice Timgren from Sverigedemokraterna writes:

“The environmental movement has clearly radicalized, leaving peaceful demonstrations behind and adopting, often illegal, methods such as traffic blockades, disruption of events, hunting sabotage and, most recently yesterday, gluing themselves to a valuable painting in the National Museum.” - (S9)

In this article, Kinnunen and Timgren describe that the environmental movement has ‘*radicalized*’ and constructed a picture of the movement as a violent one, as they have left ‘*peaceful demonstrations behind*’. In the same text the environmental movement is furthermore described as ‘*cult*’, ‘*spreading doomsday prophecies, fear and panic*’ (S9).

Reconnecting these findings to the theoretical departure of post-politics, the discourse exemplified above represents a narrowed definition of what a democracy is and what actions are accepted within a democratic society (Swyngedouw, 2022). In other words - when organizations or individuals step out of the deliberative consensus-driven politics and demand change they are described (in this case) with these negatively charged words associated with threats, violence and sabotage, thus excluding them from what is seen as a democratic practice. Looking at this through CDAs dialectical theoretical perspective of discourse and social practise, this contributes to a construction of a political landscape where the legitimacy of the group is revoked - and furthermore their demands (Mouffe, 2019, p.119). An example that can be seen as a materialization of this construction of illegitimate political actors can be found in a interview with climate- and environment minister Pourmokhtari:

"It is my strong opinion that you either work within or outside parliamentary politics. If you break laws and steal things, you can't come to meetings at the Government Offices... I meet a lot of environmental organizations that act within parliamentary politics on a regular basis. I would love to meet all those who choose to do so" - (S6)

Here, Pourmokhtari expresses her opinion on which organizations are fit to visit the governmental offices, linking the breaking of laws with movements choosing to work outside parliamentary politics. Thus, constructing an understanding of extra-parliamentary groups in general as illegitimate political actors, and in extent also parts of the population politically engaged outside of party-politics, reducing the political and diminishing the space for genuine political contestation.

The discourse produced by the policymakers in Sweden are according to these findings producing a dichotomy within environmental politics, whereas the parliamentary politics is seen as representing the legitimate side and extra-parliamentary groups, their actions and demands are portrayed as illegitimate, narrowing the perception of what political engagement is allowed within the frame of liberal democracy. Contributing to constructing an image of environmental activists as threatening, disruptive, dangerous and opposing democratic values. Closely tied to

this dichotomy, a theme regarding the definition of environmentalism was found, addressed in the next chapter.

6.2 The Real Environmentalists

In addition to positioning the environmental activist groups as a counterforce to the liberal democratic society, a discourse which seems to aim at defining the “real” environmentalists was found. In this discursive pattern, ruling politicians emphasize the market- and political elites as the productive force in stopping climate and environmental degradation through innovation and market forces. They underline this difference and create a division, by pointing out the alleged in-effectiveness of the groups methods and furthermore aims to defy their political agenda. In the following quote Kristersson once again writes about the group XR through his personal Instagram profile. In this text, Kristersson builds on a narrative that these groups do not care about the climate: *“These groups pretend to care about the climate, but destroy opportunities for constructive dialogue on climate policy. That is really, really bad.”* (S2). Here we can see through a post-political perspective how the group is effectively depoliticized through the statement that they do not really care about the climate at all, but rather *‘pretend’* to care. This is put in relation to the claim that they *‘destroy’* the *‘opportunities for a constructive dialogue’*, which in the context of the statement refers to an open question time with Kristersson and Svantesson. Additionally in this quote, Kristersson refers to a *‘constructive dialogue’* as the desirable democratic condition, indicating the view of the political as the post-political condition of deliberative, consensus driven neoliberal *politics* (Mouffe, 2008. p.10). Thus, seeing asking questions as an opportunity for the people to influence the policies pursued, this is something repeatedly referred to in the material as *‘the democratic conversation’* (S1;S2).

In addition to the claim that the groups pretend to care about the climate, the groups choice of political engagement and tactics are often presented as irrational and pointless. In an interview about critique from the groups directed at her, Pourmokthari states: *‘If you want to be heard, congratulations. If you want to make a difference, if you want to solve the climate crisis - well, then you haven't done a thing’* Implying that these groups only strive for attention and do not care about what political difference they make. Additionally this is a statement that must be read

in relation to the power dynamics at play. Pourmukthari holds a position of great influence and authority and rejects the environmental movement coming from civil society, sending a message to the people as a whole in regards to their potential political influence, by implicating that extra-parliamentary actions such as protests have no influence. Thus referring to the post-political tendencies of an elite rule.

In contrast to this both Pourmukhtari and Kristersson repeatedly depict the free market, innovation, and neoliberal politics as the “*real*” or “*new*” environmental movements. In a joint debate article signed by Kristersson, Pourmukhtari and minister of energy and economic affairs – Ebba Busch – with the headline “*The market has become the new environmental movement*” (S11), posted on the government's official webpage they write: “*Initiative is boiling from north to south, not least in industry. It is fair to say that business sector has become the new environmental movement*”. In this discourse policymakers repeatedly describe individuals in positions of power and individual companies as the ‘*new environmental movement*’, as seen in the following quotes: “*but this government knows - that it's the geeky sustainability managers who quietly make a difference every day*” and:

“And then it is these CEOs, who do not let sustainability stop at a slogan or to report sustainability on the last pages of the annual report - but, seriously let fossil-free and zero emissions shape the entire value chain - and the entire management team” (S11).

This further builds on the narrative that experts with high ranking positions in society are best suited to deal with the crisis at hand. The combination of rejecting the demands originating from civil society and then promoting a societal elite, in the form of high-ranking politicians, CEOs and managers as the real facilitators in the narrative around environmental politics also contributes to the post-political picture of a disempowered people.

6.3 Liberal Hegemony and Neoliberal Values

Both the discourse surrounding democratic practices and the real environmentalists are found within an overarching discourse based on liberal hegemony and neoliberal values. The discourse

is largely based upon a language which renders other pathways than market liberalism unfeasible. This is observed in the material by policymakers often referring to a *'democratic reality'* (S6; S8), as limiting their potential political actions to deal with the situation at hand. As seen here in a quote from an interview with Pourmokthari: *"Shouting "stop" and "quit" will not work. We have a whole society to deal with, stopping the world will not solve anything"* (S5). In this text, a parallel can be drawn to how the capitalist system is seen as a natural force within a post-political society, and hence something inescapable (Tsfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2008. s. 13), and how Pourmokthari constructs the alternative (in this case meeting the demands of the activist group ÅV) as *'stopping the world'*, therefore not being an alternative and thus rejecting a possible agonistic struggle between political projects.

The next quote by Pourmokthari further clarifies that perception of a cemented economic- and political reality: *"If politics could have banned emissions, it would have been done long ago. The problem is that we want a growing economy, prosperity, and people in work. And democracy, of course."* (S7). In this text we can read that Pourmokthari talks about how policy reforms in the form of banning emissions as something impossible and associate it with losing the possibility of not just *'a growing economy, prosperity and people in work'* but also *'democracy'* itself. In this quote Pourmokthari not only dismisses the responsibility and ability of politics to act but also frames it in contradiction to, and incompatible with *'prosperity'*, *'people in work'* and *'democracy'*. Once again, democracy is part of the discourse around environmental issues, where certain types of political action are presented in opposition to democracy.

Besides the focus regarding democracy and political realities, a core theme in the data surrounding the role of politics and the market connected to the matter of environmental politics is identified. In this discourse, the role of politics is presented as an *'enabler'* for the market to find ways towards a greener future, as observed in the following quote: *"Politics should be an enabler. We must lay the foundations so that the market can drive innovation and technological development to meet the challenges posed by global warming"* (S7). In this sentence, the role of politics is described as paving the way for market interests, and the role of the market is to solve the crisis at hand. Reducing the political to the economic and seeing the purpose of politics as creating a *"welcoming business environment"* (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015. p.8). Thus, seeing

the political as subordinate to the market. A distinctive characteristic of politics within the post-political condition (ibid.).

7. Discussion

The analysis has brought insights on the contemporary political discourse surrounding environmental activism in Sweden. In these findings, underlying themes have been located regarding how politicians portray environmental activism. The results show that a general discursive trend of constructing the image of activists as disruptive actors in society is used, where individuals and organizations are repeatedly depicted as extreme, out of touch with reality and as security threats. This is partly done by describing them as not interested in saving the environment at all, but rather acting with the intent of dismantling the democratic society through different disruptive actions. This discourse constructs an image of division of what and which type of political organization is seen as accepted within a liberal democracy, where extra-parliamentary organizations, and hence parts of civil society are put in this box of illegitimate actors. Thus, reducing the people's opportunities to engage in an agonistic political struggle with the risk of potentially alienating parts of the population from further political influence. This discourse is also to some extent manifesting in the material reality of Sweden, where politicians refuse to invite organizations that are working outside of the market or party politics (S6), or close down meetings where they are expected to attend (S2). The observations above generally go in line with what scholars and human rights organizations have observed on a larger scale, where a hardened rhetoric towards activists is noted, together with different repressive materializations such as criminalization, excluding them from the political sphere. In the case of Sweden, criminalization of activists have not been observed on a larger scale other than a handful of occasions where laws on sabotage have been used against acts of civil disobedience (Solna Tingsrätt, 2022).

Further post-political tendencies are also observed within the material, where the discourse around activism and environmental politics in general is characterized through a liberal hegemonic discourse. The data consists mainly of solutions connected to market innovation and

economic growth - which is introduced as the concerns of high ranking politicians, entrepreneurs and corporate interests. Effectively depoliticizing the environmental issue and reducing it to questions of economics and technical innovation instead of seeing it as a result of ideology and political decisions. This liberal hegemony is manifested in some cases in the material by politicians emphasizing their own role in relation to environmental issues as a *'enabler'* for market expansions, thus reducing the responsibility and the ability of politics to cause meaningful change. Lastly, As the material of this thesis is of an limited scale, further research applying an quantitative approach would be fruitful to further analyze the frequency and types of words used to frame environmental activists. Such a study could be done by analyzing twitter-posts for example, where a large amount of data is available. Lastly, I see a relevance for academia to continue the research on this subject since actions by environmental activists seem to increase and emissions continue to rise. We will surely see development within the subject in the future.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the political discourse found in the data reflects a rather hardened stance towards environmental activists. Where an image is constructed of environmental activists as disorderly and attention seeking, as well as being portrayed as a threat to what is repeatedly referred to as democratic values, conversations and meetings. A discourse which effectively excludes them from the political arena and as an illegitimate actor. Additionally, this discourse tends to spill over to not just activist groups utilizing methods of civil disobedience, but also to other political organizations working outside of party-politics, at a risk of undermining democratic engagement and potentially preventing more transformative environmental and social changes. In the data post-political tendencies were also identified, where policymakers emphasized a sort of elitist rule and market-driven solutions frequently occurred through the material. The two main discourses above (framing activists as threats and highlighting the possibility of the market) came together through a discourse surrounding the “real” environmentalists, in which politicians seemed to create a perception of market capitalism as the *'new environmental movement'*. All discourses above could furthermore be found within an overarching discourse of liberal and neoliberal values in which other political pathways were discursively rendered impossible.

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<https://aterstallvatmarker.se/vi-ar-demokrati/> (Accessed: 2024-05-10)

10. Appendix

S1 - Ju2022/0 2278 Justitiedepartementet Justitieministern Till riksdagen Svar på fråga 2022/23:111 av Linus Lakso (MP) Statsministerns uttalande om säkerhetshot

https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/statsministerns-uttalande-om-sakerhetshot_hb11111/

S2 - Ulf Kristersson - Instagram - 4/10 2023

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx_RMVuMawb/?hl=en

S3 - Statsministerns tal på nationella klimatmötet 16 juni 2023

<https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2023/06/statsministerns-tal-pa-nationella-klimatmotet-16-juni-2023/>

S4 - Fredrik Kärholm - Twitter

<https://twitter.com/FredrikKarrholm/status/1705599578202935648>

S5 - Klimatministern om Återställ våtmarker: ”Gör ingen skillnad

<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/romina-pourmokhtari-l-om-aterstall-vatmarker-gor-ingen-skillnad>

S6 - Romina Pourmokhtari (I): Jag träffar bara organisationer som jobbar inomparlamentariskt

<https://dagensopinion.se/artikel/romina-pourmokhtari-l-jag-traffar-bara-organisationer-som-jobbar-inomparlamentariskt/>

S7 - Tal av klimat- och miljöminister Romina Pourmokhtari vid det nationella klimatmötet 2023

<https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2023/06/nationellt-klimatmote---tal-av-klimat--och-miljoministern/>

S8 - Det var inte i första hand omsorg om miljön som fick SD att svänga om klimatmålen. Det säger Romina Pourmokhtari i en intervju med SvD. Och hon är inte orolig för ett bakslag i EU-valet.

<https://www.svd.se/a/BWAgG9/romina-pourmokhtaris-strategi-sa-svangde-sd-om-klimatmalen>

S9 - ”Radikala miljöaktivister motarbetar klimatpolitik”

<https://www.expressen.se/debatt/radikala-miljoaktivister--motarbetar-klimatpolitik/>

S10 - DEBATT: Nej, klimatforskare bör inte vara aktivister!

<https://bulletin.nu/debatt-nej-klimatforskare-bor-inte-vara-aktivister>

S11 - “Näringslivet har blivit den nya miljörelsen”

<https://www.regeringen.se/debattartiklar/2023/06/naringslivet-har-blivit-den-nya-miljorelsen/>