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Climate Justice in a Conflictual Public Sphere: The Challenge of Mobilizing Climate Counterpublics in Liberal Democracies

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Abstract

This paper argues that the democratic legitimacy of the Green Transition depends on acknowledging the plurality and conflictual nature of contemporary climate politics in the public sphere. While youth-led movements have revitalized climate justice discourse, emerging forms of dissent—such as No Farmers, No Food, No Future—show that many ordinary citizens are concerned about the heavy interference of political institutions into their daily lives in pursuit of climate targets. Drawing on McKinnon's political conception of climate justice (Section I) and Habermas's model of the public sphere (Section II), the paper contends that public reason must be complemented by communicative spaces in which citizens can contest and shape the meaning of a just transition. Incorporating post-Habermasian insights (Section III), it introduces the idea of climate counterpublics to capture the ambivalent yet democratically significant role of alternative voices, from a normative perspective. The paper concludes with institutional strategies for communicating the Green Transition, thereby fostering a more inclusive and legitimate path toward green transformation (Section IV).

Keywords: Climate Justice; Public Sphere; Climate Counterpublics; Liberal Democracies; Green Transition.

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Society Should Be; III.II. The Ambivalence of Countervoices; IV. Communicating the Green Transition: Some Institutional Strategies for Tackling Climate Counterpublics; IV.I. The Limits of Scientific-Technical Language; IV.II. Avoiding Moralistic Discourse; IV.III. Sidestepping From Turning Climate Shaming into Institutional Humiliation; Conclusion; References.

Introduction

In recent years, public discourse surrounding the climate struggle in liberal democracies has been shaped most visibly by movements such as *Fridays for Future*, *Extinction Rebellion*, and the *Last Generation*. Led primarily by young activists like Greta Thunberg, these movements have become emblematic faces and voices of climate justice. As Darrel Moellendorf (2022) emphasizes, their importance lies not only in denouncing human-caused climate change, but in their capacity to "mobilize hope" at a time when public imagination was marked by widespread pessimism regarding a future climate catastrophe (see also Gardiner 2013; Jamieson 2014). In such a scenario, these youth-led movements have played an emancipatory role in revitalizing climate debate in the public sphere: they raised awareness, shaped new political expectations, and highlighted the unequal temporal and spatial distribution of climate harms—emphasizing how the most severe impacts will fall on the world's poor from the Global South and, especially, on future generations.

This public influence has also been institutionally acknowledged. For instance, on its official website, the European Commission explicitly credits youth mobilization as a driving force behind the 2019 launch of the European Green Deal—a project aimed at making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. To quote: "Launched by President von der Leyen in 2019, it responds to citizens' urgent call—especially from young people—for climate action" (European Green Deal 2025).

Yet, as public debate on climate change has expanded across sectors of society—and as climate action has become a "social phenomenon" that ordinary citizens increasingly experience as affecting their daily lives (Hulme 2009)—a broader range of faces and voices has entered the conversation. This includes voices that do not deny climate change or its distributive impacts, but that contest how the Green Transition should proceed and who should bear its costs. Public perceptions of climate justice are therefore not reducible to a binary between committed youth activists and outright climate deniers. Instead, a more intricate landscape emerges, shaped by differing material interests, identities, and understandings of fairness in the transition process.

Political scientists have observed, for example, forms of "process skepticism," in which individuals accept that climate change is real but question the legitimacy of the institutions producing mainstream scientific assessments, e.g., IPCC reports (see Gruber 2024; van Rensburg 2015; Ekberg et al. 2022a, 2022b). Religious organizations such as the controversial "Reasons to Believe" (2025) illustrate this tendency by combining scientific elements with theological worldviews. Although epistemically problematic, such hybrid framings may help make climate science more accessible in pluralist societies (Piroli 2025b; Kearns 2012).

Another in-between position is "response skepticism"—acceptance of climate science paired with opposition to certain climate policies (Gruber 2024; van Rensburg 2015; Ekberg et al. 2022a, 2022b). The French *Yellow Jackets* movement is a well-known example. Their protests in 2018 were not directed at climate action per se, but at the perceived regressive impact of fuel taxes on working-class households. In this case, the criticism mainly focused on the fairness of the transition, not on its necessity as a proven scientific phenomenon.

The more recent *No Farmers, No Food, No Future* protests across the EU introduce an even more complex configuration of grievances. While initially triggered by sector-specific policies—such as nitrogen emission limits in the Netherlands or fuel subsidy cuts in Germany—these protests quickly broadened to include concerns over cultural identity, rural autonomy, and distrust of political institutions (Tullis 2023; Connelly 2024; Deutsche Welle 2024; Il Post 2024). For many participants, the issue was not merely economic. The transition was perceived as threatening ways of life.

Although such movements can appear chaotic and are often vulnerable to far-right co-optation (Gruber 2024), they warrant careful philosophical attention. First, examining them helps avoid the simplistic binary of pro-climate activism versus denialism by revealing a plural and contested public sphere. Second, taking such dissent seriously prevents political philosophy from dismissing citizen concerns that do not fit the strong moral idiom of youth-led climate justice. Third, the failure to address these concerns risks enabling authoritarian, nationalist actors to easily capture climate frustration and weaponize it against democratic institutions and values.

It is therefore crucial to understand how liberal democratic institutions must communicate with and respond to those new alternative voices, especially when the Green Transition requires large-scale structural transformations that affect everyday life.

To develop this argument, the paper proceeds as follows. The first section shows how a political conception of climate justice can better address the challenge of the Green Transition compared to isolationist perspectives. The second

section integrates the idea of the public sphere into a political conception of climate justice, thereby strengthening the democratic vitality necessary for a legitimate and publicly justifiable Green Transition. The third section builds on post-Habermasian accounts to develop the idea of climate counterpublics and argues that they play a vital role in liberal democracy. Lastly, the fourth section considers some institutional strategies for engaging climate counterpublics in ways that sustain democratic legitimacy while advancing just climate action.

I. Towards a Political Conception of Climate Justice

By broadening the analysis beyond youth-led movements such as *Fridays for Future* to include alternative voices—such as *No Farmers, No Food, No Future*—a more conflictual picture of how ordinary citizens perceive the Green Transition and articulate climate justice claims becomes visible. Whereas youth-led narratives typically emphasize strong moral duties to combat climate change and stress responsibilities toward vulnerable groups, particularly future generations, these alternative voices are less anchored in such thick moral argumentation. Conversely, they tend to express concerns about the risk of institutional power intruding pervasively into their everyday lives as society transitions toward sustainability. Their claims thus align more closely with moral-political worries about power, autonomy, and the interference of state authority within citizens' liberties, rather than with moral-ethical arguments about individual and global responsibility (Piroli 2025b).

The key question, then, is whether these new alternative voices have valid reasons to worry about the intrusion of institutional power in the name of green targets. Normatively, my answer is yes.

In the Rawlsian spirit, if the Green Transition is understood as a process of structural transformation aimed at reshaping the basic institutions of society—which, by definition, influence citizens' daily routines, opportunities, and social practices—then citizens are justified in raising concerns about the reach and effects of this process. Such a transition will inevitably require the use of extensive, and at times coercive, institutional power. However, the crucial Rawlsian question is whether this institutional intervention is arbitrary or justified from a moral-political perspective. If the Green Transition is not to be arbitrary and genuinely aims to be just (Green Transition 2025), then its design and implementation must conform to some criteria of justice. This is precisely why many philosophers have turned to normative theory in recent years—what Gardiner (2012) calls the "Ethics of the Transition".

I.I. Why an Integrationist Conception of Climate Justice Can Better Address the Green Transition

Within the philosophical literature, two influential approaches have shaped debates on climate justice over the past few decades (McKinnon 2022; Caney 2020). On one side, isolationist perspectives focus primarily on the distribution of the Global Carbon Budget (GCB)—that is, how remaining allowable carbon emissions should be allocated between wealthy and poorer nations (Shue 2014; Meyer and Roser 2006; Posner and Weisbach 2010), and more recently, across non-overlapping generations (Shue 2022; Gosseries and Meyer 2009). These accounts aim to equip institutions with normative criteria to guide a fair allocation of emissions compatible with the Paris Agreement's targets.

By contrast, integrationist perspectives argue that climate justice cannot be reduced to a question of distributive fairness alone (Fraser 2022). Rather, a normative framework must integrate climate justice with other domains and other dimensions of justice beyond redistributive fairness—including poverty (Moellendorf 2014), territorial claims over natural resources (Moore 2019), climate-driven migration and displacement (Draper 2023), the biodiversity crisis (Armstrong 2024), and further interconnected issues. Caney (2020) offers two central reasons for this integrated approach: (a) there is no principled basis for treating emissions distribution as exceptional or requiring isolated analysis; and (b) patterns of emissions injustice are causally intertwined with other structural injustices, making isolated treatment philosophically artificial and politically unproductive.

However, contrary to Caney's well-known criticisms, my aim is not to dismiss the contributions of isolationist accounts. Following McKinnon (2022), we should acknowledge that a "minimalist" conception of climate justice—focused on the fair distribution of the GCB—as significantly shaped both academic discourse and international policy language. Indeed, isolationist arguments helped establish a widely recognized normative framework according to which: (a) wealthy nations have a duty of justice to mitigate their emissions more than poorer or emerging economies; (b) they must finance and support adaptation and loss and damage efforts for vulnerable countries already suffering climate harms; and (c) they must overcome "presentist" bias by recognizing the legitimate claims of future generations as rights-bearing moral agents.

Yet, although isolationist approaches have played a crucial conceptual and political role, the structural transformation required for the Green Transition demands something more ambitious than a redistributive fairness account of the carbon budget alone. At the domestic level, a just transition must not only justify how the burdens and benefits of decarbonization are distributed, but also

motivate ordinary citizens to accept and support policies that may substantially alter entrenched everyday practices—such as frequent air travel, fast fashion consumption, meat-intensive diets, and artificially stabilized indoor temperatures (McKinnon 2022). Without such public support, the Green Transition may be just, yet not stable—and therefore democratically fragile.

I.II. Political Justification and Democratic Legitimacy: McKinnon's Political Conception of Climate Justice

Drawing on political liberalism, Catriona McKinnon (2022; 2012) argues that a defensible and integrationist view of climate justice must be political, and therefore capable of addressing two key tasks at the domestic level. That is why she refers to her description as part of a political conception of climate justice. First, such a conception must offer citizens a political justification for the normative criteria guiding the transition toward a greener society—namely, a justification grounded in public reason. Public reason requires that the Green Transition be justified in terms that all rational and reasonable citizens can accept, regardless of their comprehensive moral, ethical, or religious commitments. Second, the climate policies developed to implement this transition must also gain the support of ordinary citizens. Providing a justification that meets the standards of public reason is therefore only part of the task; the other part involves cultivating the motivation for citizens to reciprocally endorse such policies and to critically reconsider habits that make non-sustainable lifestyles appear acceptable. These two requirements— justification and motivation—are complementary and together aim to achieve a just and stable green transition.

In McKinnon's defence, public reason plays a central role in accomplishing this task. Following political liberalism, she understands public reason primarily as an *epistemic constraint*: a limit on what political agents (judges, legislators, government officials, and candidates for office) may publicly invoke when justifying decisions that affect everyone. Like Rawls, however, McKinnon extends the scope of public reason beyond the official public forum to include the public reasoning of ordinary citizens or, in Rawlsian terms, a way of respecting their "duty of civility". By accepting the burdens of judgment (Rawls 2005), rational yet reasonable individuals recognize that: (a) empirical evidence about climate change is difficult to assess, given the complexity of climate models and uncertainty of predictions; (b) agreement on scientific facts does not guarantee agreement on their moral and political implications (e.g., how to balance economic costs with ecological protection, or how to allocate responsibilities across generations); (c) key political concepts—such as justice, freedom, and

responsibility—are open to multiple, reasonable interpretations; (d) individuals' social positions and life experiences usually shape how they perceive climate risks and their willingness to support ambitious climate policies; (e) values relevant to climate action—such as sustainability, equality, security, and prosperity—are difficult to compare within a single normative framework; and, no less important, (f) reason itself is finite and fallible, so no deliberative process can yield a single uniquely correct solution to the climate crisis.

If, following McKinnon, public reason requires that the Green Transition be justified in terms acceptable to all rational yet reasonable citizens, and if climate governance must secure the support and legitimacy of those citizens, then her framework still leaves a crucial point underdeveloped when addressing public reason. I refer to the sheer fact that a political justification for green transition cannot rely solely on epistemic constraints on reasoning or on motivational appeals to self-respect and the avoidance of moral shame before future generations, as McKinnon does (2022; 2012). It also requires a communicative space in which ordinary citizens can express demands, contest prevailing assumptions, and participate in shaping the public understanding of what a just green transition entails. Nevertheless, Rawls and McKinnon's description of common citizens' reasoning within public reason is still very closely connected to the way of reasoning exercised by formal political authorities in the official forum. In doing so, their model not only fails to explicitly address street demonstrators' attempts to pressure public officials into making institutional decisions (Badano and Nuti 2025), such as in the case of the green transition, but also reduces citizens' use of public reason to an epistemic constraint, rather than highlighting its "transformative" potential (Badano and Nuti 2024). Such a way of framing a conception of climate justice is indeed political, but it lacks politicization. This is why we need to "*politicize*" a political conception of climate justice, to use Badano and Nuti's (2024) expression.

This is precisely where Habermas's (2023; 1989) concept of the public sphere extends and complements the Rawlsian model (Finlayson 2019; Finlayson and Freyenhagen 2011; McCarthy 1994). Whereas Rawls locates public reason primarily as a constraint on justificatory discourse, Habermas emphasizes the dialogical formation of political claims within civil society. Public reasoning is not merely a limit on what may be said—it is a communicative practice through which democratic will-formation occurs under conditions of deep pluralism. Without an account of how common people deliberate, contest, and renegotiate the meaning of a just transition in public, a political conception of a climate justice framework risks remaining normatively compelling but politically incomplete.

Therefore, integrating the idea of the public sphere into a political conception of climate justice would strengthen the democratic vitality necessary for a legitimate and publicly justifiable Green Transition. This is the focus of the next section.

II. Politicizing A Political Conception of Climate Justice: Linking It with The Public Sphere

Although McKinnon's defence does not directly engage with the idea of the public sphere—and in this respect reflects a central limitation of Rawls's political liberalism (Finlayson 2019; Finlayson and Freyenhagen 2011; McCarthy 1994)—I argue that a political conception of climate justice can, and should, be linked to it. In particular, in this section, I argue that Habermas's normative account of the public sphere provides valuable conceptual resources for "politicizing" a political conception of climate justice (Habermas 2023; 1989). The following lines outline three main reasons in support of this connection.

II.I. From Civil Society to the Official Political Forum: The Mediating Role of the Public Sphere

The first reason concerns the capacity of the public sphere to channel the informal debates of civil society into the formal processes of democratic decision-making within liberal democracies. It is within this space that ordinary citizens can test, scrutinize, and challenge the narratives advanced by official forums such as legislatures, courts, and climate policy experts—including contesting the meaning and legitimacy of policies related to the Green Transition.

To be sure, McKinnon recognizes the significance of climate movements, particularly youth-led activism, and she acknowledges their importance in recent political life. Yet her framework leaves this dimension surprisingly underdeveloped. One explanation may lie in her continued reliance on Rawls's binary distinction between the political and the non-political. In Rawls's model, the official public forum—comprising elected representatives, public officials, and judicial institutions—must deliberate on "constitutional essentials" (such as basic rights and the structure of government) and matters of "basic justice", such as the distribution of social and economic inequalities (Rawls 2005). In this arena, participants are required to employ public reason as a constraint in reasoning. By contrast, the so-called "background culture" of civil society is the domain in which ordinary individuals and associations—churches, universities,

clubs, and other voluntary groups—address a wide range of non-official political concerns (Rawls 2005). In this second space, communicative practices may legitimately draw upon comprehensive doctrines not subject to the epistemic constraints of public reason.

Nevertheless, there is a space in between where citizens' revindications and protests often operate. This is precisely why Habermas places such emphasis on the public sphere: it is a mediating arena that enables communicative power generated in civil society to influence, and at times reshape, institutional decision-making. In doing so, the public sphere facilitates the translation of informal discursive claims into formal democratic processes, thereby making it indispensable to the democratic legitimacy of climate governance.

II.II. Beyond Technocracy: The Communicative Power of the Public Sphere from the Bottom Up

The second reason for politicizing a political conception of climate justice–and, therefore, to link it with the idea of the public sphere—is that it helps us more effectively challenge technocratic justifications of the Green Transition. I mean approaches that delegate decision-making primarily to institutional elites such as scientific experts and policymakers while excluding citizens' claims from democratic debate. In contrast to such technocratic models, Habermas emphasizes the normative importance of the public sphere as an informal yet indispensable arena of communication in which ordinary citizens can deliberate, exchange reasons, and collectively form political will without top-down institutional coercion. As McCarthy insightfully observes, Habermas thus grounds democratic legitimacy not in deference to expert authority, but in the communicative force of shared reasoning—"the unforced force of the better argument" (1994, 45).

Contrary to technocratic defenses of climate governance, this communicative approach underscores the need for open and plural arenas in which competing visions of a just transition can circulate and be critically assessed. Such spaces enable common citizens not only to debate alternative pathways of transition, but also to evaluate which trajectories align with their social, economic, and cultural conditions. In this sense, the public sphere serves as a complement, rather than a replacement, to formal public forums: it mediates the translation of communicative power from civil society into democratic decision-making, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of climate governance (Habermas 1996; Finlayson 2019).

II.III. Seeing Themselves as Active Co-Authors: From Passive Audiences to Participatory Publics

The third reason concerns the fact that the public sphere provides a space in which ordinary citizens must translate their private interests into publicly justifiable claims that all could reasonably accept—or, in Scanlon's terms, claims that could not reasonably be rejected (Scanlon 1998).

To recall, in Habermas's model, translating private interests into claims of justice does not arise from merely aggregating individual preferences, but from a communicative process in which participants must transform and convince themselves that their claims can be mutually justified and also accepted by them. The idea of reciprocity plays a central role. For Habermas, the public sphere is the space where common people are called to articulate their demands in terms that others—who are equally free and rational members of society—can reasonably accept, despite differing worldviews or social positions.

Applied to climate justice, this means that debates about what should count as a just transition cannot rely solely on instrumental or private motivations—such as economic advantage, group interest, or particular cultural-identity concerns—but must appeal to shared political values and, furthermore, a shared horizon of how a just green society should be in the coming years. Validity and legitimacy, therefore, are conquered through deliberation rather than deference to top-down institutional authority.

At first glance, this may seem similar to McKinnon's position. However, there is a significant difference. In her account, the readiness to translate private interests into justice claims does not primarily emerge from political participation or communicative engagement. Ultimately, the moral motivation in McKinnon's model springs from citizens' internal moral dispositions—especially the desire to maintain one's "self-respect" and avoid "moral shame" in the eyes of future generations (McKinnon 2022; 2012). Ordinary people, in her view, would support climate commitments not because they have engaged in a shared communicative process, but because they do not want to see themselves—or to be remembered in the future—as morally indifferent or responsible to climate harms that are presumed to harshly affect future people.

Although this appeal to self-respect and moral shame captures significant moral-ethical motivations, it leaves too little room for politics. By grounding citizens' motivation in strong moral-ethical reasons, McKinnon's approach risks overlooking the political dimension through which the validity and legitimacy of the green transition must emerge. The strength of Habermas's conception lies precisely in demonstrating that the justification and the democratic legitimacy of such an ambitious project cannot rest on thick moral-ethical duties,

however compelling, but must arise from the public exercise of communicative reason among free and equal people in the public sphere. In doing so, we can restore a political motivation rather than relying on citizens' self-respect and desire to avoid moral shame.

III. The Ambivalent Yet Democratically Significant Role of Climate Counterpublics

Up to this point, I have argued that the concept of the public sphere provides a useful link between a political understanding of climate justice and the question of democratic legitimacy in liberal democracies. However, in the form presented so far, this framework risks reproducing some of the very criticisms directed at Habermas. As emphasized in the post-Habermasian debate, particularly in Nancy Fraser's reframing of this idea, both the descriptive and normative characterizations of the public sphere must acknowledge that its dynamic is more complex and plural than Habermas has envisaged. In particular, inspired by Nancy Fraser and, later, by Michael Warner's observations, I explore the idea of climate counterpublics and their normative importance within liberal democracies.

III.I. Competing Visions of Climate Justice and of What a Just Transition to a Greener Society Should Be

One of the central criticisms shared by Fraser and other revisionist historians, such as Calhoun (1992), is that the idea of the public sphere as a largely unified and cohesive space obscures the internal struggles over divergent narratives of justice, in which some come to dominate the public sphere and others are marginalized or excluded.

Indeed, as Calhoun (1992) observed, Habermas idealized the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere, romanticizing its liberal-democratic qualities as more inclusive and egalitarian than they were in practice. In reality, this sphere systematically excluded or marginalized significant segments of the population—most notably women, gays, workers, and racialized groups. Rather than serving as a universal arena for rational exchange of ideas among equals, it functioned as a space mainly dominated by patriarchal, racist, and class-based elites. Even its supposedly neutral conditions of deliberation—where individuals were to interact "as if" they were in a condition of parity of participation—depended on what Fraser (1997) identifies as a constitutive exclusion of certain voices in order to secure the dominance of others.

In a Gramscian spirit, Fraser notes that the public sphere is typically divided among dominant and subordinate publics. On the one hand, "dominant publics" represent groups whose voices and narratives of justice predominate in the public sphere and, therefore, tend to become institutionalized within the official political arena over time, "as if" they were equally representing people's will (Fraser 1997). By contrast, "subordinated publics"—or simply "counterpublics"— represent those voices whose claims of justice typically remain excluded or marginalized, occupying a subordinated position relative to dominant publics in the public sphere.

Such a division among dominant and subordinated groups indeed aligns with the history of environmental and climate politics. As Robert Bullard's pioneering research on the Black environmental movement in the United States demonstrated, mid-twentieth-century environmental activism largely reflected the interests of more privileged social groups. Its agenda centered on leisure, recreation, wildlife conservation, and consumer-oriented ecological stewardship, while marginalizing or excluding claims related to pollution, environmental health, and discriminatory practices in the design and implementation of climate policies in the US scenario (Bullard 2019; Mills 2001; Lazarus 2000; United Church of Christ 1987). [1]

Nevertheless, rather than passively withdrawing from the public sphere, these communities created their own spaces for socialization and political organization where their voices could be heard and their claims for justice formulated in opposition to the narratives of dominant publics. Within these spaces, minorities articulated alternative narratives—or, simply, "counternarratives" (Fraser 1997)—that challenged the prevailing framework. In the case of the Black environmental movement, to return to the example, a turning point occurred when Black environmental movements reframed climate issues, revealing the material and cultural barriers that curtailed their ability to participate as equals in public deliberation, especially the underlying discriminatory biases internally hidden in the design and implementation of climate politics in the US. In response, these groups developed alternative discourses and oppositional interpretations of justice—concerning not only the "redistribution" of resources but also the "recognition" of cultural identities and social belonging (Fraser 1997).

Despite historical contestation over a romanticized view of the public sphere as a space where people could debate as equals despite their differences in class, gender, race, etc., the normative question still prevails. According to Fraser

[1] Similarly, other scholars have shown that many other minority communities, like women and Indigenous people, also historically experienced mainstream environmentalism as elitist and disconnected from their lived realities, see Piroli 2025a.

(1997), it is necessary to assess whether a single, overarching model of public sphere is indeed desirable—or even compatible—with the realities of liberal democratic societies. Although Habermas's conception of the public sphere did have the virtue of re-emphasizing the emancipatory potential of bottom-up, reason-guided participation, his model remains inadequate for at least three reasons. First, it overlooks the fact that contemporary societies contain multiple and often conflicting publics (Fraser 1997)—a feature that can foster openness and enable the evolution of competing claims to justice. Second, it fails to account for how economic and cultural asymmetries (based on class, gender, race, and other social hierarchies) create obstacles for communicative equality, thereby inhibiting the adequate capacity for "parity of participation" (Fraser 1997). Third, his model draws too sharply between the political and the non-political, excluding issues like domestic and care labor that feminist scholars have shown to be deeply political (Fraser 1997).

Taken together, these limitations call for a renewed normative model of the public sphere that: (a) acknowledges a plurality of competing voices; (b) identifies the economic and cultural barriers that inhibit parity of participation; (c) and emphasizes the need for a range of institutional remedies to support more political inclusion, redistribution of resources, and recognition of identity minorities (Fraser 2003). Such a reframe is necessary if those alternative voices—counterpublics—are to play a role in contesting and shaping the validity and legitimacy of the institutional agenda and policies.

Applied to the contemporary conflicts over the Green Transition mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Fraser's observations are particularly useful, as they highlight the risk of homogenizing—and even romanticizing—today's struggles over climate justice, thereby sidelining alternative voices that contest dominant framings. Although some groups, such as *No Farmers, No Food, No Future*, may appear more chaotic and less structured than dominant actors (like the Fridays for Future), their existence can help pluralize the voices disputing the meaning of climate justice issues. By working with a theoretical model composed of multiple publics—some dominant and others not—it becomes possible to adopt a more dynamic and complex framework capable of capturing the diversity of people's perceptions and claims. This perspective also reveals how the very meaning of climate justice is not fixed but instead continuously contested and transformed over time.

III.II. The Ambivalence of Countervoices

So far, in line with Nancy Fraser, I have argued that a normative framework for the public sphere must be closely connected to its conflict-driven functioning, in which a plurality of climate justice claims is continually contested from the grassroots to the official public forum. However, simply adopting a more plural model of the public sphere that acknowledges both hegemonic and alternative voices is necessary yet not sufficient. It is equally important to recognize that counterpublics do not necessarily pertain to a subordinated position in society (Warner 2002) and their counterdiscourses can articulate either emancipatory or regressive demands from political institutions (Melo 2025).

Although Fraser originally developed the concept of counterpublics to describe "emancipatory" spaces of resistance to economic and cultural exclusion (Melo 2025), subsequent scholarship has shown that counterpublics are not inherently subordinated as she thought, as Michael Warner (2002) correctly observed. Counterpublics may also include right-wing, populist, or anti-environmentalist formations, as many authors have been recently describing (see Gruber 2024; Rocha and Medeiros 2021). Usually, those alternative voices do contest dominant narratives—yet not in order to expand democratic participation or challenge injustice, but rather to reinforce exclusion, hierarchy, and inequality (Melo 2025). This fact calls for a more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity of counterpublics and the diverse claims they advance. In the context of climate politics, for instance, counterpublics can also play ambivalent roles. On the one hand, they can test, scrutinize, and strengthen the justification and democratic legitimacy of climate policies. On the other hand, they may also mobilize resentment, nostalgia, or exclusionary identity claims to challenge dominant narratives of climate justice—not to broaden democratic inclusion, but to defend or restore unequal social orders.

What is particularly concerning is that these countervoices are increasingly susceptible to far-right co-optation. In many European contexts, for example, ordinary citizens expressing dissatisfaction with aspects of the Green Transition have been drawn into far-right ideological frameworks—nationalist, anti-elitist, culturally reactionary, and often authoritarian (Gruber 2024). This is a clear case of the *No Farmers, No Food, No Future*. In such settings, climate action comes to be perceived not as a collective democratic endeavor, but as an authoritative imposition by some dominant groups over others. In addition, what is alarming is that this tendency to align with far-right vindications is not part of a spontaneous movement. Instead, it usually reflects a coordinated strategy that seeks to delegitimize climate action under the rhetoric of defending popular will, while

simultaneously advancing exclusionary and regressive agendas (see Connolly 2024, Deutsche Welle 2024, Finger *et al.* 2024; Il Post 2024). As a consequence, the democratic potential of counterpublics—to challenge dominant narratives, reveal overlooked injustices, and possibly transform climate policies—is increasingly at risk.

Although descriptively, climate counterpublics such as *No Farmers, No Food, No Future* have mainly been co-opted by far-right actors, normatively, counterpublics can still enrich liberal-democratic life by expanding inclusion, fostering contestation, and ensuring that alternative voices are taken into account in public reasoning. In doing so, they can contribute to broadening the grammar of climate justice across its economic (redistributive), cultural (recognition), and procedural (political) dimensions. Restoring this potential, however, requires political institutions to meaningfully engage with the oppositional arenas in which marginalized or dissenting actors contest dominant interpretations of climate justice and challenge their exclusion from official political forums. This is the topic of the following and final section.

IV. Communicating the Green Transition: Some Institutional Strategies for Tackling Climate Counterpublics

Given the ambivalence of counterpublics and the current tendency to align with the far-right ideologies, as in the case of the *No Farmers, No Food, No Future*, my final intervention in this paper is to ask: how should political institutions possibly communicate the Green Transition so that they can respond to the increasingly hostile role that counterpublics are playing in climate politics? Of course, although I cannot fully address these questions here, I believe there is ample reason for philosophical concern. In the following lines, by acknowledging particular problems in communicating the Green Transition, I will discuss some institutional possibilities.

IV.I. The Limits of Scientific-Technical Language

The first reason to be concerned is that public discourse on the Green Transition has been mainly framed by scientific expertise, technocratic planning, and abstract metrics such as emissions curves, cost-benefit models, and decarbonization pathways. While this language is indispensable for policy design aimed at sharply curbing emissions, quantitative-technical analyses must not be taken as a substitute for political debate, according to the recent manifesto by Dooley

et al. (2021). When numerical metrics and scientific statistics are treated as completely detached from values—put simply, represented as if "value-neutral" (Dooley et al., 2021)—the justification of the Green Transition risks obscuring bias and, additionally, failing to translate into meaningful public engagement. For many ordinary citizens, indeed—especially those whose livelihoods, cultural identities, or everyday routines are bound up with carbon-intensive practices, as in the case of those voices coming from the *No Farmers, No Food, No Future*—such a value-neutral communication appears too distant or dismissive of their daily concerns. The result, as we saw, is a widening gap between expert-driven justification from the EU and the social worlds they are meant to deeply transform.

This is why a merely technical, data-driven form of communication is too restrictive to address climate counterpublics. It is also important to include a value-based form of communication that justifies the transition to common people and shows how it might be an opportunity to build a more just society. [2] Of course, the values and imaginaries of such a future green society will be highly disputed, as the reality is already showing. However, this must not be interpreted as a failure to communicate with the public sphere, but as part of an open, liberal democratic process that may increase people's acceptance and support for a renewed green society in the coming years.

IV.II. Avoiding Moralistic Discourse

The second reason points in the opposite direction. While it is crucial to articulate the value commitments at stake and to motivate the present generation—the "pivotal" one (Shue 2022)—to accept and support the climate transition, political communication must also avoid sliding into moralistic discourse. In other words, appeals for acceptance and support should not be framed merely in terms of personal virtue or individual blame as if the commitment to such a virtuous behavior must occur independently of the economic and cultural burdens that must be structurally faced. Instead of bringing people closer, such moralization, conversely, seriously risks a backlash by alienating audiences through implied moral superiority, thereby undermining the broader sense of shared responsibility that effective climate action requires.

This risk is particularly evident when justifying the Green Transition in the name of future generations. Moralization here occurs especially when institutional

[2] This is rooted in the idea of associating climate justice as an "opportunity concept", as defended by Gosseries (2023).

discourse is framed merely as a matter of individual virtue or sacrifice rather than as a shared societal project. In doing so, the moralization of the institutional discourse can generate guilt, fatigue, and defensiveness, leading citizens to disengage rather than participate. The challenge, therefore, is to articulate climate responsibilities in a way that recognizes intergenerational duties without turning them into moralistic demands directed at individuals. Instead, the emphasis should remain on collective decision-making, fair institutional design, and distributive measures that ensure the burdens of the transition are shared justly. By avoiding moralization, climate policy can foster a sense of shared purpose rather than resentment or coercion.

IV.III. Sidestepping From Turning Climate Shaming into Institutional Humiliation

Mainly inspired by Greta Thunberg, who helped spark the phenomenon of flight shaming, in which public figures are named and criticized for contributing to global emissions by regularly taking private flights, some recent literature has increasingly considered the practice of *naming and shaming* as a sound institutional strategy to draw attention to carbon footprints and to encourage compliance with mitigation targets (Taebi and Safari, 2016; Dannenberg et al., 2023; Aaltola, 2021).

Given that legally enforceable measures to ensure adherence to climate commitments are unlikely to be introduced in the near term, many scholars have been defending that institutional climate shaming may serve as a viable alternative or complement to mandatory regulatory mechanisms. As Taebi and Safari (2016) suggest, such a strategy can incentivize "good behavior" and symbolically penalize non-compliance. From a moral-psychological perspective, indeed, climate shaming can play a constructive role by prompting individuals to reassess and transform their everyday practices in a more sustainable direction. As Martha Nussbaum (2004) observes, shame may function as a constructive emotion that cultivates ethical self-awareness.

However, feeling shame internally is distinct from imposing it externally on others—particularly when the actors who inflict it are political institutions. In this case, climate shaming may involve compelling agents to publicly acknowledge wrongdoing, issue apologies, or carry reputational markers such as labels or rankings. As some defenders of institutional climate shaming argue, such as Yadin (2023), this practice invites audiences to alter their attitudes and behaviors toward the targeted entity by engaging in criticism, condemnation, boycotts, or other forms of sociopolitical pressure.

Nevertheless, following Margalit (1996) and Nussbaum (2004), the line between institutional shaming and humiliation is very thin. While climate shaming, as defenders claim, involves making an agent's noncompliance visible to the eyes of the public, institutional climate humiliation goes further: it disrupts the equality of social standing of the targeted agents, symbolically lowering their status relative to others. When such a threshold is crossed, institutional climate shaming ceases to be a motivational or corrective device and instead treats its targets as second-class.

This is clear evidence of why institutions must resist the tendency to dismiss climate dissent wholesale as irrational, reactionary, or merely populist, as doing so risks reinforcing the very alienation that anti-climate movements capitalize on. Second, they must design climate mobilization strategies that do not stigmatize those who are slower, less able, or less willing to comply. As I have argued elsewhere, climate shaming easily slides into practices that undermine the equal social standing of targeted groups, turning a potentially constructive tool into a form of institutional humiliation rather than a catalyst for shared responsibility.

Conclusion

Much of the democratic energy in climate politics has indeed come from youth movements, progressive NGOs, and cosmopolitan middle-class publics. This was an important and necessary political development. However, these groups alone cannot sustain the legitimacy or durability of a just transition. A transition experienced as imposed rather than co-owned invites defensive reactions, resentment, and withdrawal. It is precisely within this communicative gap that reactionary climate counterpublics—such as *No Farmers, No Food, No Future*—have gained traction, reframing climate action as a threat to livelihoods, cultural autonomy, or national identity.

To meet this challenge, it is not only necessary to fairly redistribute the material costs and benefits of the transition (see Alì 2025) and ensure equitable access to transitional technologies and infrastructures (see Caranti 2025), but also to cultivate symbolic and discursive forms of inclusion. This means reframing climate politics in terms that resonate with everyday economic anxieties, rural identities, intergenerational aspirations, and attachments to place. Rather than treating climate dissent as irrational obstruction or disinformation, institutions must treat it as diagnostic: a signal of democratic disconnection and communicative failure. In doing so, perhaps, they can mobilize their hope for the sake of a more just and green future (see Moellendorf 2025).

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