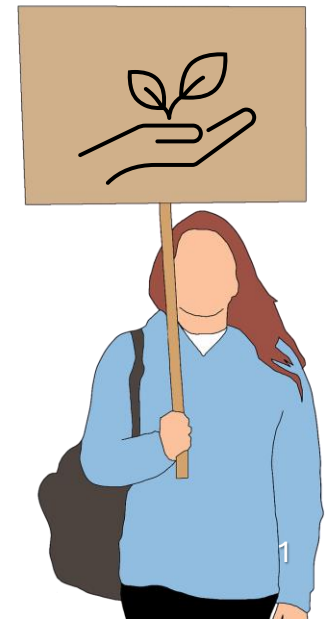


# EXPLORING THE POLITICS OF ECOCITIZENSHIP

## Ethnographic Insights in Belgian Youth Activism and Participatory Programs

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# Presentation Outline

- 1) Research context & objective
- 2) Theoretical framework
- 3) Methodological framework
- 4) Preliminary results
- 5) Discussion



# 1) Context and Research Objective



- Halfway through my PhD in Brussels.
- **Lack of action** regarding environmental disruptions, **despite** widespread **awareness**
- **Scientific literature** in 2010s points at the **depoliticization** of the environmental discourses (Žižek, 2006; Comby, 2009, 2014, 5, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2011; Kenis & Mathijs 2012, 2014ab; Machin, 2013; Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Pepermans & Maesele, 2014, 2017ab, 2018; Kenis, 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021; Carvalho, van Wessel & Maesele, 2016)
- Aftermath of 2018-2020's youth worldwide **school strikes**
- The exploration of **ecocitizenship** (= environmental/ecological engagement) in young people's discourse.
  - Exploring **young people's imaginaries** on citizens' role in the environmental disruptions

## 2. Theoretical Framework: *Poststructuralist Discourse Theory*

- *Laclau & Mouffe (1985: 2001) ; Essex School.*
- **Discursive approach:**
  - Monist ontology: discourse as a conceptual content that produces social reality (Nonhoff, 2018) (vs ontological dualism: discourse as a container for the interpretations of individuals).
  - It is through discourse that actors in the social world can interpret and understand their place within the social order in a meaningful way (Glynos & Howarth 2007; Zienkowski, 2017; Martilla, 2018; Nonhoff; 2018; Jacobs 2019, 2020).
- **Post-foundational theory**: society has no ultimate foundation.
  - The construction of ecocitizenship is contingent and is the result of power relations.
  - Ecocitizenship from its political constitution.

## 2. Theoretical Framework:

*How to study the politics of ecocitizenship?*



- **Politicization and depoliticization** are two constitutive forces of the social world.
  - Politicization: discursive force through which power issues are visible.
  - Depoliticization: discursive force through which power relations are concealed (actively or passively).
    - Analysis of the mechanisms & processes through which ecocitizenship is being (de)politicized.
- Unveiling the discursive origins of institutions, relationships, logics, and identities characterizing eco-citizen, typically taken for granted, by **bringing their contingency to the awareness of the subjects.**
- Interpreting and revealing these discourses as “symptoms of **supra-subjective structures subjectively unrecognized**” (Marttila & Gengnagel 2015, In Marttila, 2018, p.33).

### 3. Methodological Framework: *multi-sited ethnography*

- 2 contexts of young people collective environmental participation (ethnographic):
  - 1) **Activism** for climate and social justice (network rather than one specific organization; 18→35yo)
  - 2) **Governmental environmental project** “JV” (between participatory budget and citizen training; within associations primarily addressing issues beyond the environment; often within marginalized realities; 14→30yo; supported to different extends by the project manager 17→50yo)
    - Importance of **comparison** for identifying the various ways of making power relations related to ecocitizenship visible or invisible.
    - Study of **youth discourses on ecocitizenship** (≠ youth ecocitizenship) as a way to explore young people’s imaginaries on environmental engagement, beyond young people’s responsabilization (≠ legitimacy) for a more sustainable future.

### 3. Methodological Framework: *Material*



- Activists:
    - Observation notes of actions
    - Transcripts of discussions on Telegram;
    - Transcripts of long-format podcasts episodes with activists by activists (*entre-soi*).
  - JV:
    - Observation notes of environmental training (evenings and week-ends);
    - Transcripts of discussions/sharing circles during the trainings;
    - Interviews with young participants.
- *Primarily* participatory observation aimed at capturing discourse within actions, rather than relying solely on interviews // *Vacuum* in the literature on how to use PDT on participatory observations (observations notes).
- This exploratory analysis focuses on 2 podcasts episodes (activists) + 2 semi-structured interviews (JV), informed by over 250 hours of participant observation.

# 3. Methodological Framework:

## *Changes & the Research Process*

- **Research question:** how do young people (de)politicize ecocitizenship?
- **≠Abstract:** Initially, I was racking my brain trying to figure out how to present results that aligned perfectly with what I had announced. I decided to actually listen to what my material had to say.
  - « Exploring Ecocitizenship: Unveiling ~~Implicit and Explicit~~ Discourses through Ethnographic Insights in Belgian Youth Activism and Participatory Programs »
- Rather I will introduce 3 lines of (de)politicization in the discourse (coding of practices= statements + discursive practices accompanying them) of young people.



### 3. Methodological Framework: *Identifying Politicization*

Indicators		What allows me to say that something is happening at the level of politicization?
1	<b>Structuring</b>	Identification of structural logics to shed light on the situation or experience. The prism is that of structural relationships, modes of functioning of societal organization. This can notably be translated through the production or questioning of categorizations (for example, social groups) or by identifying an "us" in relation to a "them".
2	<b>Generalization</b>	Expansion of the field of concerns, desingularization, rise of discourse in generality, discourse "animated by the public spirit" (Eliasoph, 2010), that is, articulated around a common good, concerns surpassing individual issues. However, this rise in generality is not to be confused with consensualization, which erases power relations; here, the orientation towards the "public spirit" does not exclude questions of oppression, antagonism, and divergence of opinion, which are underlying and inherent to social life and social relations.
3	<b>Register of injustice</b>	The register of injustice can manifest through moral outrage (for example, through denunciation) or, more broadly, through recourse to principles of rights, justice, moral principles, redistribution, etc. This form of politicization can also emerge through highlighting one's privileges, discriminations, or inequalities.
4	<b>Responsabilisation</b>	Attribution of responsibilities to social actors regarding the situation. In other words, these are discourses that assign responsibilities by identifying social actors as "guilty."
5	<b>Agency</b>	Attributing to social actors the ability to influence the identified structural situation. This involves a sense of empowerment to address the conditions that create injustice by granting autonomy or space for change to social actors. This may particularly manifest through discourse that identifies political or systemic solutions to the issues raised.
6	<b>Complexification</b>	Highlighting the existence of other viewpoints, encouraging a shift in perspective, deconstruction, and questioning. In other words, this type of discourse invites social actors to complicate their understanding of the situation by emphasizing the contingency of their comprehension of the issues.
7	<b>Conflict</b>	Presenting an opposition between a "them" and an "us." This can be done through denunciation, implifying conflict.

### 3. Methodological Framework: *Identifying Depoliticization*

Indicators		What allows me to say that something is happening at the level of depoliticization?	
1	<b>Singularization</b>	Linking to individual concerns, the specifics of the individual, their personal history.	
2	<b>Powerlessness</b>	Confiscation of the capacity of social actors to influence the identified structural situation. This entails a feeling of being unable to address the conditions that create injustice. Social actors are powerless in the face of the identified divide and have no control over it.	
3	<b>Rationalization</b>	<b>Technicisation</b>	<p><b>Scientization:</b> The considerations arise exclusively from a scientific consensus (Carvalho, van Wessel, &amp; Maesele, 2016).</p> <p><b>Economization:</b> The considerations arise exclusively from a rational and calculated economic law (Carvalho, van Wessel, &amp; Maesele, 2016).</p>
		<b>Naturalization</b>	Normalization through attachment to human nature. Considerations stem from (human) natural laws, which cannot be problematized or subject to divisions, and thus become the subject of <i>de facto</i> consensus.
4	<b>Moralization</b>	Utilization of moral arguments to categorize attitudes	
5	<b>Rejection of conflict</b>	The rejection of conflicts and discourses distinguishing an opposition between a "them" and an "us". This can also being manifested through « consensualization » according to which everything happens as if the reality was unquestioned and was the product of a consensus.	

# 4. Preliminary Results: *Agency* (1)

## 1) Agency: From International Political Institutions (activism)...

- The **sphere of the institutions is politicized as a space of agency** for citizens, where it is possible to exert influence and become a legitimate interlocutor.
  - This "empowerment" discourse can f.i. be identified in the monitoring of political agendas; online actions directly targeting politicians via the @ on social networks; criticizing the functioning of the political system.
- **Especially at the international level** (national level to a lesser extend).
  - Emphasis on political issues at the EU level; denouncing projects worldwide based on their unsustainability; organizing actions in front of EU institutions; collaboration with activists worldwide.
- **The economic sphere** is targeted **indirectly** through pressure for political regulation.

# 4. Preliminary Results: *Agency* (1)

## 1) Agency: ...to Local Private Sphere (JV)

- The **international scale is depoliticised** by being silent as a space of action or advocacy
  - Even when projects involve the creation of multimedia materials easily disseminated on a large scale, this international dissemination isn't on the table.
- The **sphere of institutions and economic** decision-makers is also not targeted by the projects implemented. It is considered as a space where citizens have no control
  - *"Yes, certainly we may not be able to do anything on a large scale, but for everything on a small scale, they are missing something important."* (Roots, 2023)
- **The private sphere**, one's lifestyle and immediate surroundings are being politicised as the space of agency
  - JV's projects act in neighbourhoods (*vs. public sphere*) to have tangible impact on their surroundings.

## 4. Preliminary Results: *Making One's Engagement Visible* (2)

### 2) Making One's Engagement Visible: ... To Assignment (JV)

- The **advocacy of environmental engagement is politicized** through an appeal to structures via **categorizations**.
  - “Environmentalists” represent a “them,” vs. the “us” whose engagement is manifested more through “action” rather than “advocacy.”
- JV focuses on individual responsibilities by aligning their lifestyle with their values (//agency space) rather than advocating in the public sphere.
  - *“For me, an environmentalist is someone who takes care of the environment, but without exaggeration, without displaying it physically.” (Leila, 2024)*
- The **meaning making** of an action as “environmental” comes from an **external assignment**.
  - The citizen “recycles” an action by signifying it as “ecological” after an external label (f.i. flea market as eco after JV training) and thereby modifies their apprehension of ecocitizenship.
  - *« According to my friends, I talk about it all the time. To the point where one day, a friend of mine threw her can on the ground and said to me, “Oh no, I did it in front of you, Mrs. Ecology, sorry.” And I asked her, “Why are you saying that to me?” and she replied, “You talk to me all the time about the environment. That's all that comes out of your mouth.” And even I didn't realize that. » (Leila, 2024)*

## 4. Preliminary Results: *Making One's Engagement Visible* (2)

### 2) Making One's Engagement Visible: From Advocacy... (activist)

- **Advocacy is depoliticized through consensualization:** The normal order of things revolves around putting the message “out”.
  - Primarily in the public sphere: Importance of informing; getting exposure in the legacy media; narrating one’s ecocitizens’ journey in a podcast; inspiring others to get mobilized on social networks; speaking at events; of becoming a spokesperson.
  - In more intimate forms of interactions as well: having incessant conversations around the environment.
- The adoption of the **visible *ethos* of the ecocitizen is depoliticized through consensualization.**
  - *“Of course, as an environmentalist, I’ll do my zero-waste shopping and stop by the local organic café with my reusable cup”.* (Alexandra, 2024)

## 4. Preliminary Results: *The effort* (3)

### 3) The effort of commitment (JV):

- The **effort required** by environmental engagement is **politicized through denunciation**.  
→ *“To me, being eco-friendly is good [here depoliticized through moralization], but sometimes it's a bit annoying. Because you have to be careful about this, about that, about water, about waste, and everything. At first, you're motivated, you have fun, you think ‘oh yes, this is for ecology and all’, but then you give up. Because there's no more motivation and it sucks.” (Leila, 2024).*
- Roots & Leila are advocating for the articulation of ecocitizenship with **fun, simplicity & gratuity**.  
→ *“What I thought was ecology was buying things like that, maybe being vegan, doing this, doing that. And it was actually some constraints of life [...] personally, it will be more motivating to go to the barter because we know that it will always be different things, it's addictive, you never know when you'll find some treasures, which are cheaper. You just go there, and you just have benefits. I think that we should combine eco and free and simple, fun actually, something that attracts and that is ecology.”*

# 4. Preliminary Results: *The effort* (3)

## 3) The effort of commitment (activist)

- The need to "make efforts is depoliticized through consensualization in a broad sense (the normal order of things), moralization (sense of duty) and singularization (personal narrative).
  - **Consensualization** via glorifying voluntarism and self-sacrifice ("we keep going"; "it's difficult"; "struggling").
  - **Moralization** through the mobilization of the sense of duty ("we must never forget").
  - **Singularization** through the personalization of the narrative and highlighting the emotional dimension of the experience ("I try, I try"; "having hopes and despairs").
- « *We weren't there on vacation either, we were there to work, so I took it as an additional thing to do [...] In fact, mentally, it never stops because we're surrounded by activists at the COP. In the evening, when we return to our accommodation, we are always together, it never stops. There are always, always, always super interesting, super deep discussions. So, the days were very long and at the same time very intense. And it was still two weeks, so it was very long. It was exhausting, but it's very important so that's why we were there.*» (Louisa, 2022)





## 5. Discussion

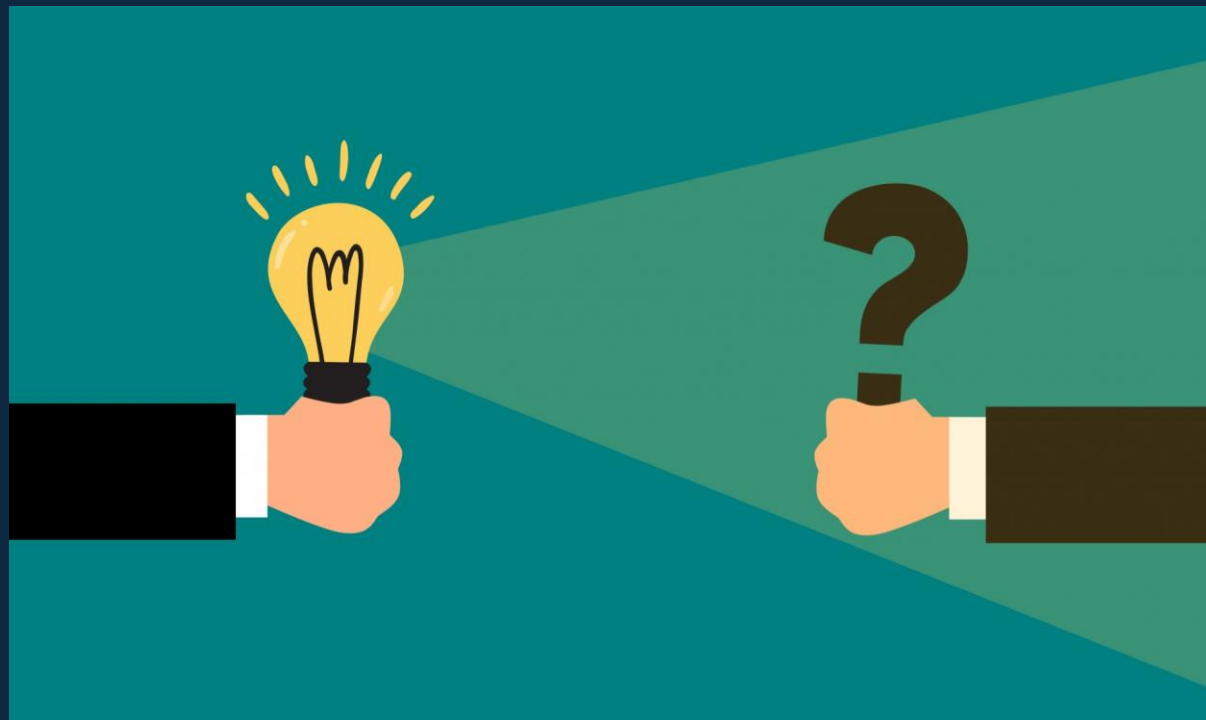
- 1) **Individualization** is **criticized** in the literature due to its limited **impact** and **lack of collective** dimension (Carvalho, van Wessel, & Maesele, 2016; Kenis, 2019). If the criticism is valid, it seems crucial to emphasize 2 points:
  - **Discriminating** against actions operating in the private sphere is **depoliticizing** (confiscates the agency of individuals who do not have access to the public sphere → gender-based, racial, generational, and classist discriminations; De Bouver, 2018, 2019, 2020).
  - The **JV project is part of a logic of collective action** and does **not reduce to individual** eco-gestures & consumption, often presented as the sole space of agency for citizens (Kovacs, 2012).
    - JV focuses also on adapting what one already has, a logic of sobriety and empowerment (but fails to empower on the international and institutional level).
- 2) Questions the **attribution of legitimacy to (under-privileged)** young people (Carvalho, 2023).

# 5. Discussion

- 3) Questions the prevalence of the **growth logic and work culture** in activist culture (f.i. endless assimilation of knowledge).
- 4) Questions the **class relationship to the future**: while activists appear to act and "make efforts" for the society of tomorrow, the JV stick to the present and maximizes its pleasure.
  - « *Saving what remains of the living is the ambition of our generation. In this podcast, I give voice to the agents of change. Those who believe in and act for an ecological and social transition. Those who break the norms and create the society of tomorrow. » (Lola, 2022)*
  - “[...] individuals from low-income backgrounds have a stronger inclination to activate their reward and pleasure system, and therefore a lesser tendency to restrict their present satisfaction [...] the future is full of uncertainties [...]” (Translation: Levasseur, 2022, pp. 5-6)
- 5) The **objective of this research** is not to produce a classification of engagement practices, but rather to investigate the different forms that ecocitizenship takes within the discourses of young people, in a variety of contexts, in order to **enrich the imaginaries of ecocitizenship**.

# THANK YOU

SCAN ME



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