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The fantasy of carbon offsetting

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Carbon offsetting has been beset by problems and failures, and relies on the mobilisation of supportive discourses and knowledge-claims to retain a sense of credibility. Psycho-analytical ideology critique can help explain how these processes interact with questions of subjectivity. Analysis of interviews with carbon offset market practitioners suggests that identification with carbon offsetting is only partial, and that it is sustained through disavowal, through trust in the authority of the Other, and through desire for carbon offsetting's unrealisable promises. It is important to grapple with the fantasy that sustains carbon offsetting in order to better understand, and indeed contest, its enduring appeal and its continued inclusion in climate governance.

Keywords: carbon offsetting, fantasy, discourse, knowledge, disavowal.

Introduction

Ever since the advent of carbon offsetting in the late 1990s, its problems and contradictions have been documented in critical academic literature (e.g. Lohmann 2005, Bumpus and Liverman 2011), press coverage (e.g. Monbiot 2006) and civil society publications (e.g. Lohmann 2006, Smith 2007). Critical accounts have demonstrated that carbon offsetting creates misleading claims about emissions reductions, generates accumulation potential for only a few privileged groups, and often displaces costs on to communities in the global South (Lohmann 2005, Ervine 2013). Such critiques have produced occasional legitimacy crises for the carbon offset market (Paterson 2010), contributing to the decline of the UN Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) offsetting system, and to the limited demand for carbon offsets in the over-supplied voluntary market (Watt 2019). However, carbon offsetting continues to haunt international climate governance at the UN in the wake of the 2015 Paris Agreement (Müller 2018), continues in the voluntary market which has seen growth in demand in the late 2010s (Forest

Trends' EcoSystems Marketplace 2019), and continues to be central to some industrial sectors' climate change plans, particularly in aviation (Lang *et al.* 2019).

Carbon offsetting involves mobilising knowledge claims and discourses that construe offsetting as scientifically valid and legitimate, in face of criticisms. As such, carbon offsetting is a terrain of material and discursive struggle, involving peculiar constructions of knowledge. Existing critical literature on offsetting, reviewed below, reveals this much. Some literature also discusses the ways by which discourses, knowledge claims, and practices of carbon offsetting interact with questions of subjectivity (Paterson and Stripple 2010, 2012, Descheneau and Paterson 2011, Ervine 2012). However, discussions of the subjectivity associated with carbon offsetting have rarely embraced insights from psychoanalytic theory, except in brief by Swyngedouw (2010) and Lohmann (2012).

Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Lacanian psycho-analysis offers critical perspectives on the ideological features of subjectivity within capitalist formations (Žižek 1989). It proposes that subjects respond to the deficiencies of knowledge claims and to the lack inherent in discourse – known as the gap between the real and the symbolic – by means of fantasy. Circulating social fantasies have been conceptualised as the means for ideology to take its failure into account in advance (Žižek 1989). Fantasy also provides the coordinates for subjects' desire, as fantasy offers promises of 'enjoyment' to the subject that are powerful, even though they are ultimately empty.

These theoretical perspectives have been applied to studies of environmental politics and related domains, such as in environmental conservation (Fletcher 2013a), eco-tourism (Fletcher 2013b), philanthropic capitalism (Wilson 2014a), and international development (Kapoor 2014), among other areas (e.g. Kapoor 2018). But the literature that has applied psychoanalytic theory to the case of carbon offsetting remains relatively

sparse (Swyngedouw 2010, Lohmann 2012). To develop this account further, I relate psycho-analytical theory to practices of carbon offsetting and to transcripts of interviews with practitioners of carbon offsetting. I argue that carbon offset markets involve processes of fetishistic disavowal (c.f. Fletcher 2013a), in which carbon market ‘experts’ serve as authority figures that subjects are willing to submit to, and in which the carbon offset approximates an ‘object cause of desire’. By articulating this argument, my aim is to make it easier to recognise the fantasy that helps sustain carbon offsetting, so that it could become easier to ‘traverse’ the fantasy and to transcend this problematic practice.

Fantasy and desire

Interpretations of Lacanian psychoanalysis offer an account of how subjects manage tensions between representations and reality based on inter-linked concepts of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real (e.g. Žižek 1989). The Symbolic order involves language, which mediates our understandings of the world. However, the Symbolic is an unstable and incomplete register of meaning (Kapoor 2014, p. 1122); its instability is explained by the Real, which is a complex entity that resists and subverts attempts at symbolisation, such that there is always a gap between the Real and any Symbolic representations of it (Žižek 1989, pp. 190–191, Fletcher 2013a, p. 798).¹

Symbolic efforts to impose coherence on the Real are inevitably inconsistent, producing an ‘irreducible excess’ beyond our illusions of order. These excesses and

¹ The Real can be viewed as both an inert presence that resists symbolisation, and a void around which the symbolic order is structured (Žižek 1989, Wilson 2014b, p. 304). The Real subverts signification; it can never be fully represented (Fletcher 2014, p. 90). Although we can never fully grasp it, we can still appreciate the Real through its ‘effectivity’, through the distortions and disruptions it produces in the symbolic order (Žižek 1989, p. 191).

inconsistencies manifest as ‘symptom’, which ‘indicates a fundamental antagonism or inconsistency in the social order’ (Fletcher 2013b, p. 35). Some of the experiences of symptom can be traumatic, as the subject becomes aware of the inadequacy of their experiences of ‘reality’, which are ruptured by the Real (Wilson 2014b, p. 304).

The Imaginary, for Lacan, involves the psychic response to the inadequacies of attempts to symbolise the Real (Fletcher 2013b, p. 35). The Imaginary is a realm of ‘seductive images and meanings, which often provide the illusion of wholeness and clarity’ (Kapoor 2014, p. 1122). The Imaginary involves efforts to conceal the ‘essential disjuncture’ between the Real and Symbolic, to bridge the gap of their inconsistency, ‘by means of fantasy’ (Fletcher 2013a, p. 798). Fantasies are all ultimately false and hollow (Žižek 1997, p. 20), but they sustain the subject’s ‘sense of reality’ (Žižek 1999, p. 51), and offer the subject the promise of *jouissance*.

Sometimes translated simply as ‘enjoyment’, *jouissance* is more accurately understood as a slippery, unstable (im)possibility of enjoyment (Wilson 2014a), or as the perverted pleasure of the painful experience of repeatedly missing a goal (Žižek 1999, p. 297). People strive for *jouissance* by means of fantasy, which provides a meaning-context for desire. Desire is structured around striving for *jouissance*, in an unending quest (Stavrakakis 2007, pp. 239–40). The Lacanian concept of the object cause of desire, the *objet petit a*, refers to that which sets in train (causes) our desire, promising full enjoyment, but without ever being able to fulfil the promise (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, p. 262).

The Lacanian *objet petit a* is not strictly speaking a tangible object that could be empirically represented, but is rather an ‘object that exceeds our grasp’ (Cederström and Spicer 2014, p. 191). In the case of advertising, for example, the *objet petit a* is not the thing for sale, but the thing’s promise of ‘something more’ which proves always

unattainable (Böhm and Batta 2010). The *objet petit a* is a sublime object that the subject views, from within a fantasy-frame, as a desirable lost secret that could deliver them enjoyment (*jouissance*) (Žižek 1991). Yet this ‘chimerical object of fantasy’ (Žižek 1989, p. 69) can never bring full satisfaction.

On this account, fantasy provides means for subjects to account for the disjuncture between representations and the Real, and offers coordinates for desire. When applied to the project of ideology critique, psycho-analysis can help explain how subjects become libidinally invested in problematic practices.

Fantasy in environmental politics

This account of ideological fantasy, which has been discussed in much greater depth elsewhere (e.g. Žižek 1989, Žižek 1997, 1999, Stavrakakis 2007), has implications for the analysis of environmental politics. When subjects identify with master signifiers with political content, appealing to ‘liberty’, ‘democracy’ or ‘consumerism’, for example, then these offer implicit answers to the question ‘what does the Other want from me?’, generating injunctions to ‘be free’, ‘vote’, or ‘enjoy!’ (c.f. Sharpe and Boucher 2010, p. 8). To take the latter example, the commodities of consumer capitalism, draped in advertising, promise *jouissance* via fantasy but can never fully deliver (Stavrakakis 2007, McGowan 2016). Consumerism, read via Žižek and Lacan, is based on ‘a symbolic system onto which the subject’s constitutive anxieties (lack) can be transferred, creating a set of fantasies for people to believe in’ (Böhm and Batta 2010, p. 354). Consumer product marketing channels the desiring subject towards promises of ‘enjoyment’ through commodity purchases. Fantasies of the ‘ethical’ commodity (Cremin 2012), the ‘fair’ product (Fridell 2014), the ‘eco’ tourist experience (Fletcher 2013b), or the ‘compassionate’ consumption event (Wilson 2015a) also aim at *jouissance*, but without ever truly hitting.

Jouissance is inherently unstable, so there is always lack, which often triggers a return to the consumerist cycle (Stavrakakis 2007; McGowan 2016). In such moments, desire integrates with drive, as satisfaction is generated from failure to achieve one's goal (Žižek 1999, p. 297). Political economic interpretations of drive argue that compulsions to endlessly repeat futile behaviours that encircle loss – generating libidinal kicks from the experience of failure – can integrate with the accumulation imperative of capital (Kapoor 2015, Fletcher 2018). In a capitalist society, drive arguably propels the impetus to generate surplus value, along with the associated ecological crises of overaccumulation, and the violence of accumulation by dispossession (Wilson 2014b, Kapoor 2015, Wilson and Bayón 2017). Through both desire and drive, subjects are libidinally invested in capitalism's cycles of accumulation, production and consumption.

Fantasy in carbon markets

In the case of carbon trading and its avowed objective of decarbonisation, fantasy revolves around the 'socio-chemical compound' carbon commodity, which is the 'quilting point ... around which our environmental desires crystallize' (Swyngedouw 2010, p. 220). Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is well known as the primary greenhouse gas that drives global warming and climate change: rapid reductions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions are necessary to avoid dangerous climate impacts. What is less commonly considered is the role that CO₂ may play in the imaginary. Carbon dioxide can play a crucial role in a populist fantasy narrative, namely of an intruder that has corrupted the system (Swyngedouw 2010, p. 222). CO₂'s intruder status enables displacement of the identification of the root problem of climate change, away from systemic features of capitalism such as its uneven power relations, networks of control, or rampant injustices – instead the blame for climate change is placed on a socially disembodied thing-like entity (Swyngedouw 2010, pp. 222–223). Carbon markets abstract from the more

political or systemic features of the climate crisis, fetishising instead questions about CO₂ molecules (Lohmann 2011, 2012), and invite us to desire the resulting molecular commodities (Descheneau and Paterson 2011). The sublime object of CO₂, the external foe of the carbon market fantasy, serves as the entity to be eradicated so that the system can return to normal.² In this context, carbon offsetting proffers an especially direct promise of removing excess carbon, to neutralise it, in a fantasy of cleansing. If capitalism is understood as a system offering enjoyment (Dean 2008, Böhm and Batta 2010), then carbon markets can reinforce its promises of *jouissance* by offering to remove the ‘stain’ of excess carbon (which threatens capitalist enjoyment) via pricing, trading, and offsetting.

And yet ‘the Real ruptures and undermines Symbolic attempts to create coherence’ (Fletcher 2013a, p. 798), generating awareness of contradictions that becomes manifest as ‘symptom’. ‘Symptom’ intrudes in moments of recognition of the gaps between the spectacular normative portrayals of neoliberal environmentalism and modernising visions of development, and the common deficiencies of practical execution. Practitioners of environmental conservation (Fletcher 2013a) urban planning for ‘sustainable cities’ (Davidson 2012) and participatory development (Kapoor 2005) are often affected by ‘symptom’. Likewise in the case of carbon markets, Descheneau and Paterson remark that: ‘in conversations with carbon traders, occasionally they get a

² On this account, carbon dioxide stands in as a scapegoat, as the entity that is supposed to have stolen our *jouissance*, even though in truth it is permanently lost. Other scapegoat figures have been cast as thieves of enjoyment, such as the criminalised (Dean 2008), the Jew (Žižek 1989), and the racialised Other (Kapoor 2014), who are often deemed over-populous (Fletcher *et al.* 2014).

moment of anomie where they worry that the whole thing is sustained solely by their enthusiasm' (Descheneau and Paterson 2011, p. 675).

However, knowledge of problems and contradictions, generating symptom, does not necessarily generate change. Even if subjects dis-identify with prevalent master signifiers – noting the limitations of freedom, the constraints of electoral politics, or the partiality and ephemerality of enjoyment, for example – and even if people recognise that their activity involves following an illusion, 'still, they are doing it' (Žižek 1989, p. 30). Cynicism and irony are not necessarily disruptive to the power edifice because activities can continue, albeit with mockery (Žižek 1997, p. 20). Recourse to 'disavowal' (a simultaneous acknowledgement of problems plus denial of their significance) reinforces fantasy, enabling 'an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance' (Žižek 1989, p. 142). People may act out 'sustainability' practices that are known to be not sustainable (Davidson 2012), can feel compelled by the mystique of celebrity even though they see 'through' it (Fletcher 2015), and will maintain rituals that perform belief in practices that are known to be false and hollow (Wilson 2014a). Awareness of the gap between vision and execution in environmental management practices, or in international development discourses, starts to function as a 'public secret' maintained through provision of selective knowledge claims and the explaining away of uncomfortable facts (Fletcher 2013a, Wilson 2015b, Carton 2020).

Exploring the fantasy of carbon offsetting

Although rarely conceptualised in terms of ideological fantasy, carbon offset markets display clear features of a gap between the symbolic and the real. Offsetting persists despite substantial evidence of failure, through the valorisation of particular forms of knowledge. Advocates of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), for example, have strategically deployed selective forms of knowledge to defend the legitimacy of carbon

offsetting against critique, in an effort to perpetuate the social order and accumulation potentials associated with the CDM (Lohmann 2005, Newell 2014). Although most offset projects are certified through networks of consultants, verifiers, and standards agencies, using calculative technologies and evaluation systems, the knowledge economy of offsetting only selectively invokes, and otherwise dispenses with, the materiality of each 'project' that is due for certification (Lohmann 2011, Bracking 2015).

Carbon offsetting knowledge claims are interlinked with discourses of the green economy that employ imagery and narrative to 'entrain or entangle normativity in what is sold, making emotion central to the generation of price' (Bracking 2015, p. 2349). The governmentality of carbon offsetting aims to generate a perception of carbon offsetting as inherently virtuous, to 'neutralise resistance by imbuing the commodities of carbon markets with a self-evident moral quality' (Paterson and Stripple 2012, p. 565). Carbon offsets are framed in spectacle, and generate value through the mobilisation of discourses and images that are often disconnected from any supposedly related material asset, project or activity (Igoe 2013, Bracking 2015).

Carbon offsetting's virtuous spectacle arguably creates a fictive 'economy of appearances' based on circulating virtual representations, generating a commodity fetishism that obscures the material features of the socio-ecological relations involved in the production of carbon credits (Igoe 2013, Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2014). Contested cultural imaginaries, and the dynamics of neoliberal climate science, are inter-related with the political economy of the offset markets, amidst the broader dynamics of capitalism (Levy and Spicer 2013, Lohmann 2017). So, carbon offsetting persists partly because of knowledge claims and discourses, which play important roles in the social construction of value in the green economy (Bracking 2015).

Combining critical literature on carbon offsetting with literature on psycho-analytical ideology critique can help us appreciate that carbon offsetting problematically responds to the growing social, climatic and ecological crises of capitalism in a fashion that encourages subjects to embrace the logics of neoliberal environmental governance (Ervine 2012), even though a more fundamental reckoning with the features of subjective attachment to a dying planet is needed (Fletcher 2018). Continuing to expose myths and flaws of practices like carbon offsetting can be valuable in exposing the gap between knowledge/discourse and material reality in environmental governance. But the limits of this strategy must also be appreciated, recognising that fantasy can enable subjects to account for failures in advance. People already perceive, in different ways, the gap between the Symbolic and the Real; only the mad will truly confuse words with the order of things (c.f. Žižek 1999, p. 274). The starting point for analysis is not that ideology masks the true state of things, but that subjects manage their ‘symptom’ through recourse to (unconscious) fantasies that structure social reality (Žižek 1989, p. 30). It is therefore helpful, politically, to further analyse the fantasy of carbon offsetting, in order that it could eventually be traversed.

Methodology

To further analyse the fantasy of carbon offsetting, I link insights from a longer term study of the challenges associated with carbon offset markets to the theoretical perspectives introduced above. I draw on examples of practices in the carbon offset market, and fragments of interviews conducted with carbon offset market professionals, to develop and illustrate the arguments that follow. The goal of the analysis is not to prove in a systematic fashion that carbon offsetting, in all its guises, is sustained by ideological fantasy. Rather, the data are introduced to further illustrate the broader argument by highlighting moments in which the (seemingly abstract) concepts of

psycho-analytical ideology critique are visible in some of the practices and discourses associated with carbon offsetting.

The interview data were collected in 2015 for a qualitative study of carbon offsetting. 65 practitioners – working in varied roles including offset project development, carbon standard development, consultancy, auditing, and offset retailing – were interviewed in a semi-structured fashion. Questioning revolved around the relationships between working practices and both the problems of carbon offsetting and the rationales for it. The interviews took place, in person and by phone, with participants who were primarily based in Europe or in India. Interviews were conducted with a diverse cross-section of participants in the carbon offset ‘value chain’, although the resulting data is not claimed as a representative sample. The conversations were recorded, transcribed and analysed using coding software.

The data were not initially collected with psycho-analytical ideology-critique in mind. Instead, the transcripts have been re-visited to assess how the discourse of carbon offset market practitioners, as recorded in 2015, could illustrate the dynamics of ideological fantasy. The interview data were read with the expectation that, since carbon offsetting involves a litany of failures linked to its founding on fundamentally problematic knowledge claims (Lohmann 2005), these failures will be both acknowledged *and* disavowed, both experienced as ‘symptom’ *and* shrugged off or blamed on scapegoats (Fletcher 2012, 2013a, Fletcher *et al.* 2014).

Analysis of interviews provides attention to language, in the register of the symbolic, but this struggles to capture features beyond the symbolic, such as enjoyment (*jouissance*) (Proudfoot 2010). This presents a challenge, given that the project of ideology critique embarked on here has an objective of ‘extracting the kernel of *enjoyment*, articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same

time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy’ (Žižek 1989, p. 125).

I have two methodological responses to this challenge. Firstly, the analysis is supplemented through my observations from conferences and events such as Carbon Expo (2013, 2014, 2018) and the carbon market pavilion at the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (2013), where participants discuss carbon offsets in an affective register (c.f. Descheneau and Paterson 2011). These observations are drawn upon indirectly to inform the arguments that follow.

Secondly, my analysis involves reading interview discourse ‘awry’, by looking obliquely at data for what it can reveal of the elusive *objet petit a* (c.f. Kingsbury 2010). Such a particular reading makes it more apparent than ever that the interview transcript analysis, and the selection of illustrative examples, involves subjective, even peculiar, interpretations of the data (Thomas 2010). I thus make no claim to objectivity. Rather, I offer the material and my analysis, in connection with theoretical accounts, as a means of highlighting commentaries and moments associated with carbon offsetting through which we may glimpse the following inter-related processes: disavowal, with its links to cynicism; belief, with its basis in the (vacant) authority of the Other; and desire, which encircles the *objet petit a* of the carbon offset.

Disavowal and the cynical subject

Practitioners are often ready to acknowledge problems and failures of carbon offsets.³ Such acknowledgement can encourage the subject to express cynical distance towards carbon offsetting, at least in some moments. However, it is not necessary to fully

³ This can be conceptualised as the intrusion of ‘symptom’ (c.f. Wilson 2015c)

identify with the practice of carbon offsetting to be invested in it. A cynical distance towards carbon offsetting does not necessarily lead to disruption of its practice.

For example, a carbon offset retailer (#1) stated at the end of an interview that ‘I also only partly believe in carbon offsetting [laughter]’. The practitioner’s statement and laughter could be interpreted as a moment where the subject escapes the ideology of carbon offsetting and sees through the absurdities in which they are expected to believe. However, according to Žižek, ‘it is at this moment of liberating laughter, when we look down on the absurdity of our faith, that we become pure subjects of ideology, that ideology exerts its strongest hold over us’ (2011, p. 3). Žižek’s point is that ideology does not simply mask the real state of things by producing illusions in the realm of knowledge, which could support an interpretation of ideology as false-consciousness. Rather, illusion is based in the ‘reality of what people are doing’ (Žižek 1989, p. 30). Even when people know that their activity involves following an illusion, ‘still, they are doing it’ (Žižek 1989, p. 30).

Although cynicism can potentially lead to disruption of power relations in professional settings through resistance, it will also frequently serve as a ‘conservative force in contemporary workplaces’, contributing to the ‘inadvertent success of corporate power relations, rather than their failure’ (Fleming and Spicer 2003, p. 160). Dis-identification with prescribed roles is compatible with continued performance of those roles, producing a situation where we might ‘collude in our own and others’ domination’ (ibid. p.160-1). On the Žižekian view, it is a mistake to think that one can simply escape ideology by keeping a critical distance, for this can lead to ‘ideological delusion at its worst: precisely by not identifying with the web of power, one is truly caught in it’ (Böhm and De Cock 2005, p. 284).

Moments of doubt or cynical laughter can be conceptualised as features of the intrusion of ‘symptom’, in which the Real ruptures a symbolic fabric and the fantasy that holds it together (c.f. Jones and Spicer 2005, pp. 231–232). Yet the rupture is very often incomplete, giving rise instead to the manifestation of ‘neoliberal neurosis’ in which agents ‘engage with the symptoms of the Real of Capital, but in a disavowed form that prevents them from identifying their own responsibility for the exacerbation of these very symptoms’ (Wilson 2015c, p. 86).

Comments from an employee of a voluntary carbon standard (#22) can help illustrate the relation of cynicism and disavowal, including its seemingly paradoxical elements. At one moment, the employee confided their lack of confidence in carbon offsetting by saying: ‘I think the whole concept ... [pause] there are problems. I think as a system it could be really abused.’ At another moment, when the interviewee was struggling to remember the rationales for carbon offsetting, they joked that they ‘should’ have a list of carbon offsetting’s benefits ‘tattooed into my brain’. On a mundane level, the formulation shows that the interviewee apparently felt that they ought to be able to more fluidly extol the virtues of offsetting, even though their views were simultaneously critical of the practice.

More deeply, the joke highlights the absurdity of the expectations of the practitioner’s role, creating a paradox of circularity which is best resolved by looking to a Lacanian account of subjectivity. The joke expresses horror in the idea that an employee’s brains should be tattooed with the party line. Its horror implies that the practitioner, who surely would not submit to such a procedure, must be ‘authentically’ identifying with the list of benefits to be memorised. Yet simultaneously the practitioner declares their willingness to embrace the horror of a ready-to-read tattoo, their readiness for submission. But then we may recall that this is not a ‘real’ wish, just a joke; or indeed,

that ‘we never truly desire what we wish for’ (Žižek 1999, p. 302). We are presented with a circular joke-horror paradox where the expressed wish is both true and false. The way out of the paradox is to conceptualise the core of the subject as pure void, upon which fantasy creates a multitude of subject positions from which the subject can float, shifting identification from one to the other (Žižek 1989, p. 198, Žižek 1997, p. 40). This account of subjectivity helps us appreciate how some practitioners can perform expectations associated with their role, since they are able to manage their symptom through disavowal.

The authority of the Other

This section extends the insights on disavowal by exploring their connection to the exteriority of belief, or the way that ‘intimate beliefs ... can be transferred, delegated to others without losing their sincerity’ (Žižek 1989, p. 32). This section looks at the way belief is sustained by appealing to the technical knowledge and expertise of actors who will vouch for carbon offsets (even though all such technical processes are fraught with difficulties and rely on sleights of hand (Lohmann 2005)). The argument is that the entity of the ‘expert’ – here represented by fellow carbon market professionals – is a figure of social authority that the subject willingly submits to for re-assurance when doubting their belief (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, McGowan 2016, pp. 41–44). The appeal of carbon offsets depends on the perceived authority of the experts who assure and certify the absence of carbon that is supposed to cancel the buyer’s excess.

Analysis of interview transcripts shows evidence of this dynamic, as some practitioners appeal to trust in the procedures of other people working in the carbon market to sustain their own belief in the legitimacy of practice. For example, an interviewee (#13) who was responsible for a company’s purchases of offsets, who was

well versed in carbon management techniques, appealed to trust in the carbon offset retailer for assurances about the technical qualities of the offset:

I know people in [the carbon retailer] take that [additionality] seriously, scrutinise that, and that when the credits are released and certified, the additionality test is covered. So, I can't further comment on that because I'm not the specialist doing it, but yes, I think it is important that there is no additionality, and that it is looked at, and I can only hope that it is looked at in the right way.

This corporate buyer of offsets is demonstrably not an expert, but is reassured by trust in the retailer and the certification procedures.⁴ The trust vacillates between confidence (I *know* it is taken seriously) and doubt (I *hope* it is looked at in the right way). In either case, the practitioner's belief relies on the authority of the retailer.

The situation above is often replicated through the offset market, as practitioners frequently expect others to believe for them. Consumers may feel that companies are purchasing voluntary offsets for a carbon neutral status in order to be ethical *for them*. Similarly, corporate buyers may believe in the offset because the retailer generates belief in the carbon commodity *for them*. One offset retailer (#27) was very explicit about this, stating: 'that is why you employ a carbon offset retailer like this, and you say prove to me that the additionality features of this project are genuine'. In turn, offset retailers may appeal to the authority of in-house procurement staff to justify their own confidence in the carbon commodity. For example, an offset retailer (#31) stated:

If there is a dodgy additionality claim, we will not touch that project. Our carbon sourcing team ... they are the experts. If they [procurement] don't like that project

⁴ The interviewee's lack of expertise is visible in the hope there is 'no additionality', when in fact it is necessary to have additionality: its absence undermines the whole concept of an offset (c.f. Paterson 2010, p. 354).

or the additionality claims, or they are a bit wary on it, then they are not going to buy it.

This exaggerated claim appeals to the figure of the procurement expert to offer reassurance for belief. However, the in-house due diligence procedures are typically cursory, so procurement staff, in turn, may outsource belief to voluntary carbon standards (Watt 2016, pp. 163–4). Going further, a retailer (#27), perhaps aware that confidence is never complete, also claimed that ‘we only sell carbon credits that are being verified and validated by DOEs [Designated Operational Entities, i.e. auditors] that we trust – respectable DOEs’. Such comments are part of a systemic effort to transform the guesswork of auditors at project level to legitimised, ‘trustable’ carbon units (Yocum 2016).

The transfer away from fundamental uncertainties that are resolved in a fashion favourable to project developers (Watt 2016, pp. 125–138), to confidence in ‘carbon neutral’ claims, occurs through a supply chain that enables outsourcing of beliefs to external others to sustain normative enthusiasm (c.f. Fleming and Spicer 2003, p. 170). There are parallels to Žižek’s example of watching a mildly amusing television comedy in which the embedded canned laughter will laugh for you (Žižek 1989, p. 31). Here, the ‘expert’ will believe for you. This highlights the social dynamics to ideological fantasy: even if an individual does not (fully) believe, others will do it for them, in a process that can be repeated *ad infinitum*. Like a set of Russian dolls, where the interior is the subject’s belief, that belief is represented by an other, recurrently, until the point where there is only nothing inside. The last section concluded by pointing to the Lacanian view that there is a void at the heart of the subject, or in other words that the subject ‘is structured around an unsignifiable lack’ (Jones and Spicer 2005, p. 233), and this section extends

the insight to help show that ‘the Other with which the subject identifies is also structured around a central lack’ (ibid, p. 233).

Offsets and objet petit a

The material above suggests that partial identification with carbon offsetting is sustained through disavowal and appeals to the (ultimately vacant) authority of the Other. . In this last section, I suggest that both these processes occur more readily because the carbon offset sits in close relationship to the *objet petit a* (Swyngedouw 2010). I argue that desire encircles the carbon offset even though the offset cannot truly satisfy that desire.

One way of illustrating the *objet petit a* and its problem (that ‘we never truly desire what we wish for’) is in the phenomenon of retraction, through which the ‘way to evoke desire is to offer an object and then *immediately retract it*’ (Žižek 1999, p. 302 emphasis in original).⁵ In the retraction, desire encircles the object, but the object itself is as unstable as any fleeting experience of *jouissance* that might be associated with it (c.f. Stavrakakis 2007, p. 240).

An example of retraction occurs in discussions of how voluntary carbon offsetting ‘should’ be deployed. A common narrative insists that carbon offsets should be enrolled only for ‘unavoidable’ emissions (Lovell *et al.* 2009). This narrative emerged partly in response to complaints that offsetting was allowing organisations or individuals to purchase a ‘carbon neutral’ status through a ‘quick fix’ transaction: that could be perceived as greenwash if people and firms were only outsourcing ‘reductions’ and were

⁵ Žižek (1999, p.302) uses the example of a seduction scene to illustrate the retraction: The question ‘Would you care to come to my place for a coffee?’ generates a reply ‘Well, I don’t drink coffee...’ to which the rejoinder is: ‘No problem, I haven’t got any!’

doing nothing to change their own behaviours (Lovell *et al.* 2009). The carbon offset then vacillates between being a quick fix and a last resort. Some voluntary carbon offset retailers offer a ‘quick fix’, but retract it by saying that offsetting should only be used for ‘unavoidable’ emissions; conversely, the full implications of the ‘unavoidability’ narrative are retracted by offering the offset as the ‘quick fix’. The result is empty circularity, and its emptiness can help us appreciate how the carbon offset approximates the *objet petit a*, which is a ‘pure void’ that elusively sets in train our (ultimately impossible) pursuit of *jouissance* (Žižek 1989, p. 184).

The words of a voluntary carbon offset retailer (#12) help to illustrate this dynamic:

Offsetting is an emissions reduction, it’s just an external emissions reduction as opposed to an internal emissions reduction. We always encourage our clients to reduce as much as they can, but there comes a point where you can’t reduce any more unless you turn the lights off and turn everything off and go and sit in the darkened corner and shiver, but that’s not realistic [laughter].

The initial insistence on equivalence between external and internal reductions seeks to legitimise the ‘quick fix’ discourse. But the offset retailer reverts quickly to emphasise the importance of reducing as much as possible, before shifting tack again to offer the offset as the quick fix for residual emissions.⁶ The retraction helps reveal the instability of the offset’s promise. The offset promises to remove your guilt, but it will only (fully) do so if you do everything possible before offsetting; but since you cannot do that, the stain of guilt (i.e., lack) will remain. This is just one of the ways in which the promise of *jouissance* is evoked and revoked through the offset: no matter how much you

⁶ At stake within the retraction is the encouragement of ‘northern consumers to consider part of their emissions to be simply “unavoidable” rather than as part of a pattern of energy use that can only be tackled through political and social organizing’ (Lohmann 2008, p. 363).

offset and correspondingly reduce, nor how little, it will never be enough. Ongoing lack accompanies the carbon offset.

The insufficiency of the offset is also apparent in so far as this or that carbon offset is never truly 'it'. This can be glimpsed in the discourse of advocates of carbon offsetting, especially when they argue that the problems of carbon offsetting do not apply to the 'real thing'. The offset is supposed to have a self-evident moral quality (Paterson and Stripple 2012), and when that presentation is disturbed by examples of problems, then those problems are often deemed to apply only to some 'bad projects', but not the true heart of offsetting (Watt 2016, pp. 169–172). Take the discourse of a carbon offset retailer (interviewee 27), responding to a question about problems of non-additionality:

You are not destroying the concept [of offsetting], you are just saying that there are some bad projects out there. If you take the point of view that there are a number of projects that are not additional, then buy additional projects.

In other words, if your desire is not satisfied because of concern with technical problems like additionality, the retailer will instead offer you the 'genuine' artefact. By this logic, no problem is so great that it could 'destroy the concept'; for even if every project in the world were systematically shown bad, in the future there could be a good one. The only true offset is the offset that fulfils 'the concept'; as soon as it does not, it can be deemed only a poor imitation.

The 'bad projects' – which must be discursively contained and re-categorised, for fear of tainting the concept – can be construed as historic, isolated cases, which everyone has moved on from (Watt 2016, pp. 158–161). Fundamental failings are often reclassified as learning opportunities for a vast technocracy, working to correct the 'errors' that stand in the way of offsets' unachievable promise (Lohmann 2008). Failings might even be reclassified as the works of carbon 'cowboys', the bad guy scapegoats who ruin our supposedly more noble forms of enjoyment:

In the past there have been these cowboys who set up projects through land grabbing and say they are REDD projects ... I think people who criticise projects of REDD in general, it is incredibly irresponsible of them. They are looking at people who have attempted to produce REDD projects and have failed completely and what they are actually doing is damaging the efforts of other REDD project developers who are just trying to protect threatened forests and trying to prevent emissions being released into the atmosphere and uplifting communities.

So if you got burned by a carbon ‘cowboy’ – claims interviewee 38, an offset retailer, in the passage above – and have the tenacity to suggest that the problems are linked to the structure of the REDD+ mechanism (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017), then you might be deemed misguided and irresponsible, because such cases could be proclaimed to not really be REDD+ projects at all.

The offset here resembles the Hitchcockian MacGuffin, the plot device that sets a story in motion, but which is in itself nothing (Žižek 1989, pp. 183–4). Hitchcock’s original articulation of the MacGuffin is itself expressed as a retraction. A stranger on a train asks a fellow traveller what an item of luggage is. *It’s a MacGuffin*. ‘What’s a MacGuffin?’ *It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish highlands*. ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish highlands.’ *Well then, that is no MacGuffin!* The parallels with the carbon offset are uncanny. ‘What’s a carbon offset?’ *A device for sustainable development and carbon neutrality* (for example). ‘But there is no sustainable development and carbon neutrality.’ *Well then, that is no carbon offset!* This perspective offers the idea that desire for the carbon offset is not closely affixed to this or that carbon credit; rather, the desire is for the *objet petit a* that is more associated with the promise of the carbon offset, which in essence remains empty (it is a void, an absence). Despite its vacuity, stories can be attached to it, generating the potential for subjective investment

through forms of enjoyment that are structured in fantasy (Swyngedouw 2011, pp. 256–7).

Conclusion

Amid worries about a descent to post-truth, populist nativist politics, it is worth remembering the many post-truth features of neoliberalism (Swyngedouw 2019), and that the frenetic selectivity of appeals to neoliberal climate science are close to their zenith when it comes to the practice of carbon offsetting (Lohmann 2017). It is well recognised that carbon offsetting has been sustained via problematic knowledge claims and misleading, spectacular discourses. Engaging with Lacanian psycho-analysis and interpretations of ideological fantasy suggests that all such discourses and knowledge claims founder on the Real, generating the experience of ‘symptom’, which can be managed through disavowal, such that identification with carbon offsetting remains partial and incomplete. This account reflects three propositions that have a Lacanian twist. First, that there is ongoing lack at the heart of the subject, such that nobody could ever ‘fully’ identify with carbon offsetting. Second, that a barred or vacant Other – personified as figures of expertise – authorises and validates forms of (partial) belief in carbon offsetting, generating injunctions to believe that are in the end hollow. Third, that desire for the carbon offset is connected to the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, which is at its central point nothing at all, but which is nevertheless charged with the promise of ‘enjoyment’, or *jouissance*.

By proposing these arguments, I aim to stimulate greater appreciation of the potential for analysis of ideological fantasy to generate new insights on environmental politics. Linking the conceptual framework of psycho-analytical ideology critique to the case of carbon offsetting can help explain the stickiness of carbon offsetting, even in face of vigorous contestation from those seeking alternatives to better promote climate

justice. I suggest that the remnants of desire for carbon offset credits continue because they can, for example, offer subjects illusory promises of recuperated ‘eco’ enjoyment of capitalism’s penchant for consumerist fantasies (Ervine 2012), or because the rich may enjoy the spectacle of the smiling poor (c.f. Wilson 2014a) ‘cleaning up’ to absolve the subject of their carbon ‘sins’ (Smith 2007, c.f. Cremin 2012). But such promises are not realised by an offset itself; the lure of the promises resides ultimately in the *objet petit a*, which is in itself nothing.

This contribution is here pitched as a continuation of a broader conversation that has not yet ignited in the analysis of environmental politics. Even in the narrow case of carbon offsetting, there remains much more to say about the forms of ‘enjoyment’ that offsetting serves up, which have only been alluded to here. Much more could also be said about the potential of different political strategies to ‘traverse the fantasy’ that sustains carbon offsetting. More broadly, the dynamics of enjoyment and fantasy apply to many more cases than just that of carbon offsetting, so it would also be valuable to extend this form of analysis more deeply to other (problematic) features of climate politics or the green economy.

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