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Reception of climate activist messages by low-carbon transition actors:

Argument evasion in the carbon offsetting debate

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How do adherents to hegemonic discourses construe and respond to radical arguments by activists? To address the question, we examined how adherents to hegemonic climate change discourses react to a climate activist's arguments. In interviews conducted with corporate actors of low-carbon transitions, we used a video excerpt to elicit critical reactions to an activist's argumentation on carbon offsetting. We used the critical reactions as an index of interviewees' reception of the activist's case and pragma-dialectical theory to analyze them. We found that interviewees advanced four types of criticism concerning *individual agency*, *awareness-raising*, *neutralization*, and *financial instruments.* We discuss their inter-relations and how interviewees construed the activist's argumentation in ways that evaded his more antagonistic claims.

Keywords:

activist discourse; argument reception; frame contraction, evasion strategies, carbon offsetting

Introduction

Calls for serious measures and earnest participation have characterized climate change (CC) discourse since its institutionalization under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). Many times voiced by activists, such calls have acquired a new slant after the 2015 Paris Agreement as countries and corporations now build their policies largely on "carbon neutrality," "carbon offsets," and "negative emissions." Despite acquiring a hegemonic status in the UN-led governance regime, neutralizing or offsetting carbon emissions remains a contentious policy in the broader social debate. Offsetting aims to compensate for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions created in a location through emission reductions where they are less costly (Bumpus and Liverman 2008). Its market-based rationale is that it is an economically efficient way of mitigating CC for those who cannot avoid GHG emissions. Offsetting is also contested as a policy mechanism that commodifies GHGs, sustains environmentally harmful habits and industries, and impedes engagement with the unequal political relations that lie at the heart of the climate problem (Böhm and Dabhi 2009; Bumpus and Liverman 2008; Smith 2007).

The debate between those despising carbon offsetting as an accounting trick and those championing it as paradigmatic for green growth is not new, and its history reveals that those who confront hegemonic discourses and narratives find little inclusion in key forums where the latter dominate (Carvalho, van Wessel, and Maeseele 2017). The confrontation of activists and advocacy groups with dominant discourses has contributed to their exclusion from politics proper of CC, rendering them outsiders of the global governance regime (Corry and Reiner 2020). The debate on carbon offsetting thus provides a case of discursive interaction between transformative civic actors and actors who adhere to hegemonic discourses.

The goal of this study is to examine the critical reception of a climate activist's arguments on carbon offsetting by corporate actors of low-carbon transitions. We assumed our interviewees – managers and engineers in renewable energy and consultancy companies, users and implementers of carbon-offsetting projects – adhere to hegemonic discourses on carbon offsetting. We focused on how adherents to hegemonic discourse construe and deal with radical arguments. In the interviews, we used a video to confront our interviewees with arguments that contest the usefulness of carbon offsets in mitigating CC. The video used for eliciting critical reactions featured an activist advancing multiple arguments. We used the critical reactions to the elicitation material as an index of the interviewees' reception and analyzed them using pragma-dialectical theory (Krabbe and van Laar 2011; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). We take the debate on carbon offsetting as a rich case to demonstrate that policy and communication processes very much depend on how participants with different prior knowledge and systems of references variably take up and construe a given argument.

In what follows, we first briefly introduce the activist/mainstream opposition in the CC debate, describe the argument reception framework we draw on, and defend critical reactions as a convenient analytic unit in studying argument reception. Then we describe the material and the procedures used. In our analysis, we identify four salient critical reactions to the activist's account. The four criticisms focus on different arguments raised by the activist and construe his argumentation in different ways. To deal with the different interpretations of the activist's case and navigate the complex argumentative relations, we use a pragma-dialectical analytical reconstruction. Remaining attentive to the points of divergence between our analytical reconstruction and our interviewees' interpretations, we show the ways the disagreement space is restricted in each criticism. Our discussion takes into account the relations among the different

types of criticism as well as what is overlooked in the critical reactions. We conclude that the persistent disregard in the critical reactions to the broadly antagonistic arguments of the activist may be seen as an evasion strategy through which adherents of hegemonic discourse manage to remain within a "contracted frame" of the debate.

Radical and mainstream discourses in a changing climate

The dialectic between radical and mainstream positions has been persistently accentuated in environmental discourse and policy (Castro, Üzelgün, and Bertoldo 2016; Dryzek 2003; Kakenmaster 2019). Considering that radical and mainstream positions exist in situated interactions (Schifeling and Hoffman 2019), radicalism can be understood as an oppositional undertaking against an external and hegemonic target (Karell and Freedman 2019). In turn, the radicalism of social movements concerns "the degree of legitimacy that is imputed to their objectives, rhetoric, and tactics by relevant external audiences" (Haines 2013, 1). Responding often to an already existent institutional framework, radical actors are associated with extreme measures and calls for more profound social change (Schifeling and Hoffman 2019). From an argumentative perspective, this means that radicalism can be described as questioning ideas and assumptions that are otherwise consensual in a given policy framework.

In the discourse on CC, the cleavage is often pronounced around issues of large-scale technology, social justice, and market-based policies (Corry and Reiner 2020; Schifeling and Hoffman 2019). The dominant techno-economic approach in corporate arenas seeks to tackle CC by influencing people's behavior as rational, self-interested, private individuals (Kakenmaster 2019). In turn, social movement activists typically uphold solutions that are consistent with a systemic problem definition (Corry and Reiner 2020), linking CC with broader social justice issues (Fernandes-Jesus, Lima, and Sabucedo 2020) in a wider horizon for social and political

change (Dryzek 2003). This inclusion of broader or systemic concerns lies in the very definition of radicalism and is captured by the notion of "frame extension" (Stevens 2006).

While in the broader discursive framework radical discourses can open space for moderate strategies and demands to be redefined and normalized (Schifeling and Hoffman 2019), activists are often stereotyped with hostility (e.g., militancy, obstinacy) and eccentricity (e.g., tree-hugger, hippie) (Bashir et al. 2013). Crucially, this negative stereotyping occurs in regard to the collective or public sphere behaviors, not the individual or private space behaviors (Klas et al. 2019) and is negatively associated with perceptions of the cooperativeness, not the competitiveness, of the activist (Castro, Üzelgün, and Bertoldo 2016). Consequently, environmental activists tend to prefer concessive formats over confrontational (Üzelgün et al. 2015) even in the context of intergroup conflict (Üzelgün, Lewiński, and Castro, 2016).

Reception and selection

Scholars agree that argument reception is not a passive process (e.g., Hample 1986; Tindale 2015; Venhuizen, Crocker, and Brouwer 2019). Arguers derive meaning, attribute beliefs, preferences, and commitments to one another, drawing on their personal and community history as well as the immediate situation. Reception is a selective process motivated in part by the arguers' *cognitive environment* – prior knowledge and system of references they bring to a discussion (Tindale 2015).

A notion in argumentation theory pertinent to this selection process is *topical potential*, used in examining how speakers exploit the disagreement space (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2000). In a critical discussion, arguers maneuver by exploiting the topical potential in pursuit of different goals. For example, in confrontation with an adversary, it is advantageous to restrict the

disagreement space in a way that makes it easiest for one to handle the subject matter. Similarly, when common ground is explored, arguers try to establish starting points most beneficial to their cases. The study of such selection and editing processes assumes that an antagonist first reconstructs the constituents of a given argument and then externalizes a response based on that reconstruction (Hample and Dallinger 1990). In other words, in the framework used in this study, re-presentation of an adversary's arguments hinges on their reception by the arguer and is demarcated by the limits of the arguer's cognitive environment.

Critical reactions

Criticisms can be defined as a wide range of linguistic means that amount to negative evaluations – questions, statements, counterexamples, counter-arguments, charges of fallacy, situational and personal attacks (Krabbe and van Laar 2011). Criticisms are critical reactions ensuing from an antagonist's response to a set of arguments or argumentative moves. They constitute a key element in the study of reception due to cognitive environments or contexts being empirically unobservable but accessible through their consequences on discourse and interaction. As critical reactions essentially rely on an antagonist's reception – his or her reconstruction of the delivered message – they may serve as an index for examining the reception of a particular message.

The literature typically categorizes criticisms with regard to their *focus*. For instance, Pollock (1986) has distinguished between *rebutting* and *undercutting* defeaters. The rebutter focuses on the propositional content of an argument. The undercutter focuses on its justificatory power or linking premise. In a similar vein, Johnson and Blair (1994) have distinguished *acceptability*, *relevance,* and *sufficiency* criticisms: the first type focuses on an argument's

propositional content and the other two on its justificatory power. The latter two differ in the degree of challenge they pose to the link between the argument and the standpoint: while a relevance criticism challenges the linking premise altogether, a sufficiency criticism accepts the linking premise but brings in other considerations that render the justification insufficient. Among the criticisms focused on particular arguments, the relevance and sufficiency criticisms – i.e., undercutting defeaters – require from the critic a higher level of involvement and competence in interpreting the target argument, since what is at stake is to undercut the line of reasoning involved in it (Dandotkar, Magliano, and Britt 2016).

Critical reactions of the kinds mentioned above focus on individual arguments; they deal with particular premises. Such reactions operate at the ground level of a discussion and are called *ground-level* criticisms. If a critical reaction instead focuses on the argumentative situation, the discussion itself, the persona, or the strategies of the arguers, it is called a *meta-level* criticism (Krabbe and van Laar 2011). To sum up, topical selection can be understood as picking up particular features of a target argumentation – e.g., arguments, argumentative moves, the arguer – and focusing on them.

Method

As part of a study on green corporate discourse, we conducted 48 interviews with managers and engineers active in the low-carbon transitions in Portugal and Turkey.[1] The companies were selected through the national renewable energy business associations. Participants were mostly

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[1] In the broader comparative study conducted in 2017-2018, Portugal and Turkey were taken as two geographically similar, institutionally different cases. In this study, we assume the elicitation task responses as arising in the framework of the global governance regime, where offsets are legitimated and used.

managers of the companies. The interviews were conducted in English in the participants' workspace and lasted on average about 105 minutes.

About mid-way into the interviews, we used a video-elicitation technique, presenting a short video excerpt to the interviewees to instigate a discussion of carbon offsets. Such elicitation tasks are useful for providing some consistency in interview interactions, increasing reliability, and collecting more authentic response data (Harper 2002). We aimed to imitate an informal conversation about an online video, rather than an experimental setup.

The material

The video excerpt was selected because it is explicitly argumentative, typical of online videos, brief, and visually simple (involving only a headshot).[2] It features a climate activist who argues against carbon offsetting. We first reconstructed the activist's argumentation as a compass to navigate the complex argumentative relations ensuing from the video-elicitation task. In our reconstruction, we represented the activist's implicit standpoint as *Carbon offsetting should not be used as a policy to mitigate CC* (see Table 1 for all references to the activist's reconstructed argumentation).

To support this standpoint, the activist argues that carbon offsetting, *placing responsibility on individual consumers* (1.1b), *makes people think they don't have to worry about the choices they make* (1.1a). These two coordinative arguments work together to support the standpoint. They have two different lines of argument supporting them. In one, the activist argues that carbon offsets are *fictitious commodities created to exploit climate consciousness* (1.1a.1), and while they seem to neutralize carbon emissions, actually do not (1.1a.1.1). In the

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[2] Interviewees viewed the first 70 seconds of this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uk9Ev91jjQ8

line of argument supporting 1.1b, the activist claims that *the more emphasis we put on individuals, the further we move away from what really needs to happen* (1.1b'), although he concedes that *personal lifestyles have a role to play in how we respond to climate change* (1.1b'.1a). This is because *our choices as individuals are still very limited in the context of climate change* (1.1b'.1b), *without there being a more profound systemic change* (1.1b'.2b), which seems to require, in his view, *to organize as communities* (1.1.b'.2a), and *a move away from the growth-based model* (1.1.b'.2c, all in Table 1). His argumentation here revolves around the structure/agency problem well-known in the social sciences.

These two lines of argument seem to offer a preliminary topical choice for interviewees: focusing on the fictitious neutralization of GHG emissions (1.1a) or the appropriateness of individual choices in CC action (1.1b). While the former line of argument involves a more technical discussion, the latter line opens the debate to broader concerns with the political and economic status quo. As will be shown in the analysis, the argumentative relations are more complex than choosing one of the two lines of argument.

Analytical approach

An argumentative context was established in 37 interviews, with a total of 57 critical reactions.[3] We analyzed them using the reconstruction transformations and notation standards of pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). In our reconstructions, the standpoint comes at the top (level 1), and the justifying arguments follow downward, with linking premises indicated by apostrophes (e.g., 1.1') and implicit premises indicated in parentheses. These reconstructions elucidate (i) the structure of the activist's argument against carbon offsetting (Table 1), (ii) the

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[3] We conducted a total of 48 interviews but excluded 11 from the analysis for different reasons such as lack of sufficient English comprehension and apparent complete agreement.

focus of the recorded critical reactions, and thereby (iii) the interviewees' interpretations and understanding of the activist's argument. In view of the design of the study – the activist not being present as an argumentative partner – we expected our interviewees to address the argumentation presented in the video while targeting the *universal audience* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969).

The climate activist is explicitly critical of carbon offsets. In our analysis we refer to him as the proponent (of the argumentative setup), but he may also be designated as an opponent (of the carbon offsetting policy). In examining the collected responses as critical reactions rather than responses to criticism, we also paid attention to the concessions made by interviewees and to the broader institutional context. We assume that reconstructible commitments associated with a specific argument "must also be accessible, in principle, to naive reconstruction by the arguers themselves" (Jackson 1992, 261). We also take it for granted that an argument may be plausibly interpreted in various ways, showing, next, the different paths and patterns through which the activist's argument was construed.

Arguing the different threads of the carbon offsetting debate

The analysis is organized around the four criticisms identified: *individual agency, awareness-raising, neutralization,* and *financial instrument* criticisms. Each criticism focuses on a particular argument of the activist (in order of appearance 1.1b', 1.1a, 1.1a.1.1, and 1.1a.1.1' in Table 1). We also recorded responses in which the interviewees focused on the overall discourse of the activist, or the persona of the activist. Statements such as "There are certain people like this. He's partially right, but not realistic at all" or "I generally know the mentality of this one" are two examples of these meta-level reactions. We return to these reactions in the discussion section. In what follows, we proceed with the criticisms that focus on particular arguments, providing two

examples for each, and reconstructing the more complex one in every subsection. (Unless indicated otherwise, examples come right after the video excerpt.)

Table 1. Analytical reconstruction of the argumentation in the video-excerpt

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(1 Carbon offsetting should not be used as a policy to mitigate climate change)

1.1a Carbon offsetting makes people think they don't have to worry about the choices they make
1.1a' It is very dangerous to make people think they don't have to worry about the choices they make
    1.1a.1 Carbon offsets are fictitious commodities created to exploit climate consciousness
    (1.1a.1' A fictitious commodity makes people not worried about their choices)
        1.1a.1.1 Carbon offsets do not neutralize emissions
        (1.1a.1.1' A policy that does not neutralize emissions is created for exploitation)

1.1b Carbon offsetting places all of the responsibility on individual consumers
1.1b' The more emphasis we put on individuals, we're moving away from what really needs to happen
    1.1b'.1a Personal lifestyles have a role to play in how we respond to climate change
    1.1b'.1b The choices of individuals are still very limited in the context of climate change
    1.1b'.2a What really needs to happen is to organize as communities to create political pressure
    1.1b'.2b What really needs to happen is a more profound systemic change
    1.1b'.2c What really needs to happen is a move away from the growth-based model
        1.1b'.2c.1 The growth-based model is based on the corporate self-interest
        (1.1b'.2c.1' A growth model based on corporate self-interest is unacceptable)

Criticism 1: Individual agency is essential

The most salient (N=15) type of critical reaction came in response to the activist's argument *The more emphasis we put on individuals, the further we move away from what really needs to happen* (1.1b'). It follows from the concession made by the climate activist: "*I think personal lifestyles have a role to play in how we respond to CC, but I think our choices as individuals are*

still very limited in the context of CC without there being a more profound systemic change"
(1.1b'.1a and 1.1b'.1b). Accordingly, in many criticisms concerning *individual agency*,
interviewees first reversed the concessive construction (around the *but*) and then focused on
1.1b'. Below is an example (concession marked with italics, critical reaction underlined):

Example 1: Interview 8, manager in a renewable energy company, Portugal

Ok, he believes that we have a role as individuals, but we have to change, it's not enough. *Ok, we need to change the system and the way of living*, but I don't agree with him in the sense that that doesn't come from individuals. As again, as I said, in democracies that's the way to do it, ok? Everything starts in the individual, and it is the group of the individuals will uh that will elect people that will take decisions that concern the system. So, everything starts on the individuals, ok?

Interviewee 8 starts his criticism with the matters of agreement. He first rephrases the activist's
concessive clause. Then in a concessive move, he acknowledges the need for systemic change,
and after the *but* he disagrees with what he discerns as undermining individual agency. This
concessive construction indicates the way the interviewee interprets a specific part of the
activist's message. He supports this concessive criticism with two arguments:

C1 Change in the system needs to come from individuals (We need to change the system, but...)

   C1.1 In democracies everything starts in the individual

     C1.1.1 In democracies the people who take decisions that concern the system are elected by individuals

In so arguing, he seems to interpret the activist's argument as follows:

We need to change the system (1.1.b'.2b and indirectly 1.1b'.1a - agreement)

Change in the system doesn't come from individuals (*their role is not enough*) (1.1b' - disagreement)

We have a role as individuals (1.1b'.1b - agreement)

The interviewee's critical reaction thus transforms the activist's 1.1b' into a matter of disagreement. This transformation hinges on both trimming "what really needs to happen" out of the activist's argument, and re-contextualizing 1.1b' in a particular understanding of democracy – trimmed down to parliamentary elections and individual voting behavior. Consonant with the literature (Castro, Üzelgün, and Bertoldo 2016; Klas et al. 2019), the interviewee upholds private choices as adequate and democratic, while setting aside the public activities expressed by the activist. This type of criticism, most salient in our corpus, many times involved a concessive "yes, but" construction. Despite its concessive structure, the criticism in this example essentially dismisses the activist's argument 1.1b'.

In some cases, the *individual agency* criticism was expressed more subtly:

Example 2: Interview 32, manager in a renewable energy company, Turkey

Here... I think both ways: <u>we have to make the personal attitudes, personal behaviors must be environmental</u> and effective and the energy efficiency way, and the governmental or big organizations and the technology companies must support this.

Here too, the focus is on the propositional content of the activist's argument that in responding to CC, emphasis shouldn't be put on individuals (1.1b'). But instead of promoting individual choice as the means for systemic change, in this example the interviewee presents systemic change and individual attitudes as continuous. In other words, he seems to avoid prioritizing one over the other. By emphasizing that both are important, he indirectly addresses the activist's argumentation which prioritizes only one. More subtly, the perspective presented by the activist, namely "a more profound systemic change" (1.1b'.2b), completely vanishes from the argument. Instead, powerful institutions and "technology companies" are devised to support the change in "personal attitudes and personal behaviors."

In short, *individual agency* criticisms focused on the activist's argument against privatization of the public problem of climate (1.1b'). In transforming it into a (sub)standpoint, the interviewees avoided the supporting arguments – and broader considerations – of the activist. Among these are the calls to "organize as communities to create political pressure" (1.1b'.2a) and "move away from the growth-based model" (1.1b'.2c), which is "based on the corporate self-interest" (1.1b'.2c.1). When stripped of these considerations, the activist's argument becomes easy to undermine. Instead of a one-sided focus on "profound systemic change," one needs to see the complete picture. Thus, many interviewees simply emphasized that both sides of the individual/system change are important. This ostensibly 'balanced' interpretation of what is in fact partial is one way a radical claim can be dismissed as a one-sided partisan view.

Criticism 2: Offsetting raises people's awareness

Four critical reactions focused on the argument "*Carbon offsetting makes people think they don't have to worry about the choices they make*" (1.1a). These will be called arguments for *awareness-raising*, since they hold that carbon offsetting actually makes people more conscious about their choices and their costs. Below is a short example:

> **Example 3: Interview 21, Operations manager in a renewable energy company, Portugal**
>
> (...) he says that it's dangerous, <u>but it might have a positive impact</u>. If people do become aware that flying is a lot of fuel, if people do travel less because of that, then it might- it might have a positive impact.

The acceptability of 1.1a is in question here since the interviewee does not just challenge the idea that carbon offsetting relieves people from worry and responsibility. She also offers a counterexample – awareness of the cost of air travel – to support her criticism.

Striking in this example is the indirectness of the criticism. In the absence of an explicit expression of disagreement, there is only the contrastive *but* to indicate the challenge. More importantly, the counter-consideration is constructed conditionally: carbon offsetting "might have a positive impact" *if* people become aware of what their consumption entails. What we have in this example is a counter-consideration that weakens the argument criticized without necessarily assuming its opposite (van Laar and Krabbe 2013). Following this simplest form of *awareness-raising* criticism is a more complex formulation carried out partly at the meta-level:

Example 4: Interview 24, Engineer in a renewable energy company, Portugal

That's true! But the thing is... *it's totally true*, but we need to see the reality and what we- what do you- what do we want. Reality today is: I only sell, uh, good environmental conscience to a com- to a company if I prove them that they have, uh a financial benefit, okay? The only way that I have now to-to- to create an environment market is giving him that benefits. (...) *Carbon and the carbon economy, not the perfect model*, but I think it's going to be the first step. But it's true, it's true, it's... like I said it's a carbon market that we create to start a new conscience in the global economy. But *it's not perfect, I assume that*. But, uh I don't see any other... what he said is going to- I- I- I don't see any possibility to change things to that point fast, or without steps, or without steps that are not perfect steps, but with uh growing steps, and we are going to be there. It's my vision, but now, first of all, it's very important the conscience of individual choice.

This example includes two lines of criticism. First, following an obscure agreement preface "that's true!" – obscure because it is not clear what exactly is true – and the concessive *but*, the interviewee's challenge is expressed indirectly: "we need to see the reality." The urge to "see the reality" implies the critical view that the activist's argumentation lacks the realistic outlook crucial for (environmental) policy discourse. Addressing the argumentation in the video excerpt as a whole rather than particular moves in it, this initial reaction constitutes a meta-level criticism. Integrated into this criticism, the interviewee presents his own 'realistic' view:

C1 Creation of a carbon market is going to be the first step in CC policy (It's not a perfect model, but…)

    C1.1a We need imperfect, growing, economically-minded steps in CC policy

        C1.1a.1 The reality today is that social actors act environmentally only if they have a financial benefit

        C1.1a.1' We need to see the reality

    C1.1b The carbon market is created to start a new consciousness in the global economy

    C1.1b' The consciousness of individual choices is important in CC policy

Of the two parallel or coordinative (Snoeck Henkemans 2003) arguments in defense of the carbon market (C1.1a and C1.1b), the second one constitutes the locus of the ground-level disagreement. This is the second line of criticism in example 4. Here, that the carbon market is devised to create "a new consciousness in the global economy" (C1.1b) constitutes a denial of "*Carbon offsetting makes people think they don't have to worry about the choices they make*" (1.1a). As in the previous example, the interviewee suggests that, rather than releasing people from responsibility, the "carbon economy" has the goal of creating a new consciousness. In delivering this argument, he concedes two times that it is "not the perfect model," arguing also that it is a slow and incremental process of muddling through. It thus becomes clearer that the initial obscure agreement preface regards the "more profound systemic change" that is needed (1.1b'2b), not any other proposition concerning the nature of carbon offsets. Hence, it is possible to infer the interviewee's construal of the activist's argumentation the following way:

> *We need to change things in a profound way* (1.1b'2b - agreement)
>
> *The carbon economy does not work /is not a good model* (disagreement)

As shown in this argument, the criticisms upholding the *awareness-raising* potential of carbon offsets is leveled against the argument that carbon offsets serve as indulgences of a consumer culture. This second line of disagreement is built upon two competing images of collective/consumer action. In the activist's representation, people and the carbon economy

remain in tension, and carbon offsets are "*fictitious commodities created to exploit climate consciousness.*" The individual is expected to be more than a decent consumer and to "*organize as communities to create political pressure*" – an argument consistently overlooked by the interviewees. In the interviewees' representation, people and corporations work in harmony, as the latter support the former in gaining consciousness of the costs of one's actions through offsetting. The meta-level overtones of the *awareness-raising* criticism in example 4 indicate that one should view carbon offsetting with low ambition, as an initial step of a society only recently becoming reflexive or conscious of the costs of its practices.

Criticism 3: Offsetting neutralizes carbon emissions

The third type criticism focused on the elementary argument "*you can't neutralize your emissions once they're out there*" (1.1a.1.1). Taking issue with the *neutralization* of emission reductions, the activist's argument lays at the foundation of the disagreements examined in the previous subsection. Notice that once 1.1a.1.1 is refuted – i.e., carbon offsets are shown to actually neutralize emissions – the activist's argument of carbon offsets being fictitious (1.1a.1) does not hold. The critical reactions focusing on the elementary argument 1.1a.1.1 are thus consequential for the arguments that depend on it. Below is a simple example of the reactions (N=11) this argument received:

Example 5: Interview 21, operations manager in a renewable energy company, Portugal

Yeah, so he's saying if carbon is out, then there is no such thing of compensating... hmm... hmmm... (laugh) What about trees, they consume carbon? And if you planted trees, it does consume carbon?

17

After expressing what she takes as the main point of the climate activist, the interviewee resorts to the rhetorical question "What about trees, they consume carbon?" in response to "*if carbon is out, then there is no compensating,*" a version of 1.1a.1.1. Such questioning typically aims to cast doubt on the target proposition (Freeman 1991). In this example, with her questions operating at the ground level, the interviewee implies that the activist's position would fail in providing a convincing amendment. To diminish the acceptability of the activist's argument, the well-established relationship between trees and carbon dioxide is presented in a rather sarcastic manner. Despite its question form, the criticism may be seen as aiming at refutation rather than just casting doubt.

The second example of *neutralization criticism* is more complex. After an initial expression of disagreement and indirect comments about the activist's "approach," the interviewee goes on to explain the rationale behind the carbon offsets:

Example 6: Interview 40, Manager in a consultancy company, Turkey

Well, I don't agree. Most people without- with limited information, they say carbon offsetting is just a mechanism which gives you, if you have money, gives you the right to emit as much as your want, which is very- nonsense! ...which is, which reflects your approach actually. Basically, the theory is just like carbon tax. You will be... I just give the example of developed and developing countries. In China, you're developing, you need electricity. So, in the baseline you are expected to build a coal or natural gas power plant. So, Germany comes and says "instead of this coal power plant… [remarks on the circumstances in China and Germany] ...And Germany says "I have no place to reduce emissions. I have already done everything I can. I cannot further reduce". But the reason is, whether I emitted the gases in Germany or whether I emit in China, the global impact is same. So, in the end it will go- both go to atmosphere.

To explain that carbon offsetting is "just like carbon tax," interviewee 40 resorts to an example of international transfer of carbon allowances. In doing that, he steers the discussion from the

context of individual consumer choices to the context of compliance markets, also known as carbon trade or international emissions trading. By describing a typical carbon offset project in the compliance market, he implies that the transfer between two locations is not improper or useless. In other words, the transfer of allocated permits between Germany and China is presented as a counter-argument (C1.1 below):

> C1 Carbon offsetting is just like carbon tax
>
>   C1.1 Carbon offsetting makes polluters (e.g., Germany) legitimately transfer funds to where it can change the baseline scenarios (e.g., China)
>
>   (C1.1' Making the polluters transfer funds to where it can change the baseline scenarios is like taxing them)
>
>   C1.1.1 Emitting GHGs in China or Germany has the same global impact
>
>   (C1.1.1' If emitting GHGs in different locations has the same global impact, transfer of funds and emissions is legitimate)
>
>   C1.1.1.1 In the end emissions in China and Germany all go to the atmosphere

For his example to hold as a general argument, the interviewee continues to substantiate: "But the reason is," whether emitted in Germany or China, "the global impact is same" (C1.1.1). And if the global impact is the same regardless of location, there is nothing wrong with neutralizing Germany's excessive emissions by having China enjoy cleaner electricity (C1.1.1'). This instructional sequence goes down to express the global cover of the atmosphere (C1.1.1.1). His narrative argument depicting how an offset works to neutralize emissions in the case of Germany is aimed at a version of the activist's argument *Carbon offsets do not neutralize emissions*.

The instructional aspect of interviewee 40's argument can now be complemented by his meta-level comment – at the outset of his reaction – concerning the view of "most people with limited information." Positioning the climate activist in this group, the interviewee seems to represent the activist's argument as follows:

Carbon offsetting is a mechanism which gives you the right to emit as much as you want (disagreement)

Carbon offsets do not neutralize emissions (1.1a.1.1 - disagreement)

Although interviewee 40 recasts and ridicules the activist's 1.1a (*Carbon offsetting makes people think they don't have to worry about the choices they make*), he does not respond to it beyond dismissing it as "nonsense." Instead, using the power of narrative, he manages to challenge the propositional content of 1.1a.1.1, destabilizing the first line of argument identified in the video excerpt. To achieve this, he overlooks the arguments other interviewees focused on in the critical reactions examined in the preceding subsections. Further, his basic argument that the "global impact is same" (C1.1.1) due to the atmosphere being a shared good (C1.1.1.1) disregards the activist's argument concerning exploitation (1.1a.1), namely that the value of the emissions in different locations is, to say the least, hard to level and thus open to abuse.

The assertion that carbon offsetting "is just like carbon tax" in Example 6 can be interpreted as implying carbon offsets are a financial instrument. While in this example the interviewee does not expand on it, the fourth type of critical reaction focuses on this financial aspect.

Criticism 4: Offsetting is a financial instrument

The line of argument about the mitigation potential of carbon offsets generated 9 critical reactions among the interviewees. This criticism emphasizes that carbon offsetting is merely an economic instrument, a matter of cost-effectiveness, "a secondary purpose" in climate policy in the words of interviewee 3:

Example 7: Interview 3, manager in a consultancy company, Portugal

Uh, I fought with these people so many years. Um… on one level I agree with a lot of what he's saying... but not the core of what he's saying... If I buy from you your emission reductions, so you've reduced and I haven't. All that I did was, I re-reduced more cost-effectively from the point of view of us two reducing. *But I didn't increase on the emission reduction. I just transferred my emission reduction from me to you. So there's no increase in ambition.* And everybody accepts it; it's arithmetic. So, no offset expert is going to tell you, at least that I know of, that is going to tell you "offsetting is the way to go". *We need, at the end, we need real emission reduction, we need real de-carbonization, we can't offset the planet. There is no other planet that we can export those reductions to.* So... that criticism I think is misplaced. Offsetting only serves one purpose, which, and it's actually a very secondary purpose, which is cost-effectiveness. If both of us agree on the need to reduce, and we say "let's reduce 50% between the two of us", but I can go deeper if you pay me than 50%, and you on the other hand can go less. For the climate as a whole, it doesn't matter who reduces.

The excerpt starts by generalizing the activist's position to "these people" and is permeated with concessions – marked in italics – indicating a general agreement with "a lot of what he's saying." Beyond serving as anchor points for disagreements, such agreement prefaces help construct one's position as an informed and fair-minded contributor to the debate (Üzelgün et al. 2015). By admitting that carbon offsetting is not real de-carbonization and does not increase ambition (C1.1b.1 and C1.1b.2), and that we cannot offset the planet (C1.1b.3), the interviewee shows his understanding of the reasons behind the activist's standpoint:

> (C1 Carbon offsetting is a useful policy in mitigating CC)
>
>   C1.1a Carbon offsetting is a cost-effective tool in mitigating CC
>
>   C1.1a.1 Carbon offsetting only serves a very secondary purpose, cost-effectiveness of reductions
>
>   C1.1a.1.1 If both of us agree on the need to reduce, transferring emission reductions reduces emissions
>
>   C1.1a.1.1.1 For the climate as a whole, it doesn't matter who reduces
>
>   C1.1b That everybody accepts carbon offsetting as an unambitious policy in CC mitigation does not mean that it is completely useless
>
>   C1.1b.1 (Everybody knows that) Carbon offsetting is not real de-carbonization

C1.1b.2 (Everybody knows that) Carbon offsetting does not increase ambition

C1.1b.3 (Everybody knows that) We cannot offset the planet

The crucial task is then to undermine the significance of these arguments to which he concedes. The interviewee attempts to achieve this by C1.1b, in his words "no offset expert is going to tell you . . . that offsetting is the way to go." Expressing that, he indirectly charges the activist with distorting the case for carbon offsetting. The activist's criticism of carbon offsetting is presented as "misplaced" in the sense that it uses acceptable arguments to support a problematic conclusion. In this case, the conclusion is depicted as problematic because it ostensibly involves a straw man: it expresses opposition to a conclusion that "no offset expert" is going to make. Such fallacy charges are typical cases of a meta-level criticism (Krabbe and van Laar 2011). This part of the reaction to the video-excerpt consisting of a meta-level criticism was already evident in the interviewee's initial addressing of "these people."

Had the interviewee confined his reaction to the moves culminating in his C1.1b, his reaction would hardly work as a criticism. Hence, the coordinative counter-argument C1.1a – working in tandem with C1.1b – is crucial in *undercutting* the significance of the premises conceded. By introducing the real purpose of carbon offsets (C1.1a.1), the criticism shifts the focus from whether carbon offsets constitute real or fictitious reductions (1.1a.1), to them having another use, cost-effectiveness. This complex meta-level criticism draws on his understanding and interpretation of the activist's argumentation – inferred and reconstructed below – where the focus of the interviewee's criticism is on the implicit linking premise 1.1' below:

1 Carbon offsetting is not the way to go in CC mitigation

   1.1 Carbon offsetting is not a policy that really mitigates CC

   (1.1' A policy that does not mitigate a problem should not be adopted)

     1.1.1a Carbon offsetting is not real de-carbonization (once they're out there, they don't just go away)

1.1.1b Carbon offsetting is not real emission reduction

1.1.1c Carbon offsetting does not increase ambition

The linking premise targeted by the interviewee resembles the linking premise we attributed to the activist in our reconstruction (*A fictitious commodity makes people not worried about their choices*, 1.1a.1'). Again, in his reconstruction of the activist's case, the interviewee agrees with the bottom line arguments and even with a version of *Carbon offsetting is not a policy that mitigates CC* (1.1). The focus of his criticism is not – unlike *neutralization* criticisms – the propositional content of this argument but where the argument is supposed to lead. By breaking the link between his version of the activist's argument (1.1) and its conclusion (1), the interviewee's criticism works as an *undercutting defeater* (Pollock 1986): the propositional content of premise 1.1 is acceptable but it does not have sufficient justificatory power needed to conclude as the activist does.

In a nutshell, the interviewee argues that, although a secondary purpose, cost-effectiveness is an important component of CC mitigation policies. Notice that even if it is depicted as a secondary purpose, for the cost-effectiveness argument to hold, there should be an adequate context for the legitimate transfer of emission reductions. Interviewee 3 seems fully aware of this, making explicit in his response that "for the climate as a whole, it doesn't matter who reduces" (C1.1a.1.1 and C1.1a.1.1.1 above). This means that the *financial instrument* criticism comes as an extension – or a more elaborate version – of the *neutralization* criticism discussed in the previous section. The crucial difference concerns the focus of the two lines of criticism, with the former focusing on the acceptability of an argument and the latter on its justificatory power.

Besides this complex example of financial instrument criticisms that gets its strength from recognition and concessions, we recorded simpler reactions, characterized also by concessions. The core position here is that carbon offsetting is *merely* an economic instrument to make the low-carbon transition easier. The metaphor of "the cherry on the top" is in this sense compelling: the "mechanism is the cherry on the top for those sustainable investments. And I think those brave investors investing in those, in these new innovative energy supplies, they need the cherry on the top" (Interview 48, manager in a consultancy company, Turkey). Financial instrument criticisms uphold carbon offsets as a supplementary tool that one should not approach with high ambition. The conceding characteristic is also evident in our second example:

Example 8: Interview 33, Manager in a renewable energy company, Turkey

It can be an illusion for this person, ok. It's as far as... offsetting... I do an illusion. So, I do emissions, and then buy carbon credits, and then offset it. <u>But I create a value</u>, value chain let's say. So, let's go to back: I give this money to a company, who is eh benefiting from a wind power project and eh producing electricity. So, at the end, this becomes income for this company, and an incentive actually. So, I look to this incentive; I don't evaluate other things, whether it is illusion, whether... <u>it doesn't matter</u>. There is income and incentive.

The excerpt begins with another example of the concessive constructions frequent in our corpus. Before the *but*, in conceding to the activist's argument "*Carbon offsets are fictitious commodities*" (1.1a.1), the interviewee admits that offsetting carbon emissions may be seen as "an illusion." After the concessive *but*, his criticism disputes the consequentiality of what has been conceded. His expression "it doesn't matter" signals that the premise, whether true or not, cannot be taken to justify the standpoint it is advanced to support. In other words, the criticism's focus is on the activist's linking premise 1.1a.1' that expresses the justificatory power of the argument. The formulation of whether an offset is an illusion or not "doesn't matter" suggests

that the interviewee attempts to undercut the activist's argument on fictitiousness by raising the issue of its relevance.

Rather than engaging in refuting the relevance of the activist's argument on the fictitiousness of carbon offsets (1.1a1'), the interviewee attempts to shift the focus from the creation of "an illusion" towards the creation of incentives. The more like a disregard it looks, the more this move seems deficient. That is to say, the difference between examples 7 and 8 in giving voice to the counter-arguments is consequential. It is not enough to state – or imply – the irrelevance of a proposition. It is the argumentative effort involved in upholding such a statement that lends a criticism its weight.

Concluding remarks: Evasion of radical arguments

In this study, we investigated how adherents to hegemonic discourse construe and respond to radical arguments. To operationalize, we mapped the critical reactions of low-carbon transition professionals to a climate activist's case against carbon offsetting. To identify the *individual agency*, *awareness-raising*, *neutralization*, and *financial instrument* criticisms, we reconstructed both the activist's argumentation and the way it was interpreted by interviewees, paying specific attention to the focus of the recorded critical reactions.

Although not an exhaustive list, the four criticisms reflect both the key loci of disagreements about carbon offsets and the ways corporate actors of CC deal with a climate activist. In this framework, the study shows, first, that the most preferred line of argument by our interviewees concerned *individual agency*: to respond to an argument that denounces "placing responsibility on individual consumers" and an appeal to "profound systemic change," the

interviewees adopted an incrementalist policy discourse emphasizing people's awareness and consciousness.

The second type of critical reaction concerning the *awareness-raising* potential of carbon offsets is also notable in this regard: instead of upholding the instrument for its substantive outcome, the arguments in this type of criticism accentuated what could be a secondary benefit of carbon offsetting as a social effort. In other words, the interviewees who mounted the *awareness-raising* criticisms endorsed carbon offsetting due not to its efficacy in mitigating CC directly but to its help in increasing consumer consciousness.

The third type, *neutralization* criticisms aimed to rebut the activist's charge of fictitiousness by raising a basic argument that carbon offsets actually do neutralize emissions. If this could be demonstrated, it would be effective in destabilizing the climate activist's case that offsets are fictitious and dangerous.

The fourth, *financial instrument* criticisms took an associated but different path: instead of taking issue with the propositional content of the activist's arguments concerning the fiction of neutralization – as did the third type – these criticisms focused on the linking premise, striving to undercut its justificatory power (Pollock 1986). In other words, instead of attempting to challenge the acceptability of the activist's claim, this criticism called into question its relevance. As this means to discuss the very rationale of the policy, it indicates the interviewees' background in the broader debate on carbon economy and competence in interpreting and anatomizing the complex argument provided (see Dandotkar, Magliano, and Britt 2016).

We draw four interconnected conclusions specifically from the ways the activist's argumentation was construed by the interviewees. The first concerns the ways the activist's

standpoint was variously identified. Notably, the first two types of criticism ascribed to the activist different standpoints than we did in our analytical reconstruction. This was done by transforming into standpoints what elsewhere in the study were taken as arguments. In other words, *individual agency* and *awareness-raising* criticisms restricted the disagreement space (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2000) to non-technical aspects of the target argument – social change and individual agency. This strategy may be designed to avoid discussing topics about which they do not feel confident. It may also be regarded in the framework of moral muting (Molthan-Hill 2014) since the alternative line of the activist's argument involved morally charged claims of false consciousness and exploitation by fictitious commodities.

The second conclusion concerns the same two criticisms that emphasized people's awareness, consciousness, and responsibility. On face committed to the ideals of green growth and bottom-up democratic process, the interviewees questioned how a systemic change could take place without conscious individuals. Yet, this was achieved by discounting the tension created by the activist between the consumer and the citizen – two conflicting representations of agency in climate politics (Carvalho, van Wessel, and Maeseele 2017). Carbon offsets appear with huge potential when individual agency is circumscribed by a consumer culture, and appear as utterly detrimental when the agency is regarded in a political framework. The conclusion with regard to reception is that, in engaging with activist arguments of environmental citizenry, low-carbon professionals seem to overlook the clearly expressed political background and instead respond from within their repertoire – or cognitive environment – of consumption and markets.

Following from above, third, in most of the critical reactions the interviewees reconstructed an easy-to-defeat version of the activist's arguments concerning social change instead of addressing the agency of the political citizen in the activist's strong sustainability

27

discourse (Üzelgün, Lewiński, and Castro 2016). This version overlooked the activist's arguments that involve "a move away from the growth-based model" (1.1b'.2c) that is "based on the corporate self-interest" (1.1b'.2c.1), and his appeal to "organize as communities to create political pressure" (1.1b'.2a). When stripped of these considerations, the activist's position becomes destabilized and easy to undermine. Such evasive moves can be understood as a particular form of straw-manning in which a proponent's position is evaluated by stripping it from its very vocabulary and using a different set of commitments. Of particular use for the interviewees in such restriction of the disagreement space were the concessions and agreement prefaces. As the concessive constructions are essentially reformulations of the activist's account, they are prone to illegitimate interpretations such as straw man attacks (Schumann, Zufferey, and Oswald 2019). The key feature of straw-manning in the low-carbon transition professionals' dealing with the climate activist arguments may be called *frame contraction*, as opposed to *frame extension.* While the latter is a persuasive strategy of the activist discourse (Stevens 2006), frame contraction may be a "reception strategy" of actors who adhere to hegemonic discourses. The meta-level overtones of the two criticisms concerning "seeing the reality" (Example 4) may also be considered in relation to the disregard towards alternative imaginaries of social change.

Rather than a cognitive bias, the representation of activist positions as unqualified and naïve may be seen as an ideological predisposition that strips the political from CC policy. Even when, in a more charitable reading, some interview reactions are taken to indirectly question the activist's reliance on the public's consciousness of CC, their content envisages an economically circumscribed, contracted public sphere. It is then no surprise, as economics seems to replace the politics of CC, carbon offsetting is presented – in the fourth type of criticism – as a mere financial instrument.

A final emphasis can be put on the meta-level criticisms, which were not systematically analyzed in this study. Meta-level commentary can be seen as a classic evasion strategy through which the interviewees shifted their focus mainly to the persona of the activist rather than addressing his arguments. Both this move that is in many cases registered as an informal fallacy, and subtler evasive moves identified in this study are presumably associated with the demanding tasks involved in communicating across moral divides and vocabularies. They seem to permeate the critical reactions of the adherents of the hegemonic CC discourses against activist arguments. More scholarly attention is needed to confirm argument evasion as a strategy of adherents of hegemonic discourses against radical claims and positions, and that it would not be as salient in the criticisms of the activist actors addressing a hegemonic discourse.

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