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# International environmental sustainability discourse in the wake of Covid-19: exploring the psychic dimension of political discourse through fantasy

Jason Glynos [a], Ayşem Mert [b], Jelle Behagel [c] and Elise Remling [d]

[a]Department of Government, University of Essex, Colchester, UK; [b]Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; [c]Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, Netherlands; [d]Centre for Environmental Governance, Faculty of Business, Government and Law, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

**ABSTRACT**

In accounting for the lack of political will to meaningfully tackle environmental crises at a global level, a growing number of scholars argue that we must take seriously the role emotional and unconscious attachments play in policy discourse. In this paper, we argue that the psychic dimension of international environmental sustainability discourse (IESD) remains under-explored compared to the scholarly attention given to the structural and normative dimensions of international environmental politics. We draw on political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies to develop a framework within which to characterize and critically examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon IESD. We treat the pandemic as a dislocation, arguing that it provides a particularly productive vantage point from which to explore the fantasmatic underpinnings of IESD. We present an illustrative discourse analysis of relevant UN documents and media productions in 2020-22, foregrounding the political significance of fantasy in international environmental discourse.

**KEYWORDS**

Environmental sustainability discourse; Covid-19 dislocation; political discourse theory; critical fantasy studies; metaphor; galvanizing motif

## 1. Introduction

'Never let a crisis go to waste' is a well-established leitmotif that was reiterated and infused with hope in international environmental sustainability discourse (IESD) following the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite its devastating impacts, the pandemic was often framed as an opportunity to reimagine the future, break dependence on fossil fuels and overconsumption, transition to more sustainable socio-economic models, and (re)build back better and greener (Sarracino and O'Connor 2023).

There were strong grounds for optimism, as the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that large-scale societal transformations, once seen as politically or practically unfeasible, could be rapidly implemented when governments deemed them necessary. Despite

**CONTACT** Jason Glynos ljglyn@essex.ac.uk Department of Government, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article

significant implementation disparities across and within countries, the pandemic spurred widely acknowledged behavioral shifts, including strict lockdowns, rapid vaccine development and distribution, and large-scale economic stimulus packages. From a public health perspective, the response showed that with sustained information campaigns and decisive government action, societies could enact swift and profound change. From a sustainability perspective, early pandemic measures yielded temporary environmental benefits: reduced air pollution and emissions (EEA 2020), improved water quality (The Guardian 2020a), and wildlife trade bans linked to disease prevention (Newsweek 2020).

Although these environmental benefits turned out to be temporary on account of the swift return to business-as-usual (IPBES 2023; IPCC 2023), it revealed two key insights: radical shifts toward sustainability are possible, and some ecosystems can regenerate rapidly when pressures ease. This raises the question of how Covid-19 has shaped, and may yet shape, *environmental sustainability discourse* and the policy pathways required for the transformative changes needed to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and widening global inequalities. This question is crucial, because despite the global agreement on the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a roadmap for just sustainability transitions, meaningful action remains elusive.

This paper draws on political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies (Behagel and Mert 2021; Glynos 2021; Remling 2023) to develop a framework within which to characterize and critically examine the impact of Covid-19 upon IESD. As the SDGs have been woven into the policies and practices of various fora at the United Nations (UN), and are evaluated by the UN's High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the UN system emerges as a central site for this research. The UN is not only a forum where diverse actors convene to articulate political narratives on both the pandemic and sustainability, it also plays a decisive role in shaping the character of IESD by framing policy frameworks, principles of negotiation, and future goals – including the way its leading figures connect international policy aspirations and texts to emerging and ongoing political challenges.

We consider the Covid-19 pandemic a moment of dislocation that created opportunities for political actors to discursively re-articulate challenges and reimagine possible futures. Our analysis thus centers on key aspects of these articulatory efforts within IESD and, in light of our illustrative empirical discourse analysis, we argue that by foregrounding the role fantasy plays in shaping the UN's political and ideological responses to crises, we are able to make two key contributions to the literature. First, we develop a theoretically-informed conceptual framework suited to this type of policy-oriented discourse analysis, in particular, one that is sensitive to the unconscious and affective aspects of IESD. In doing so, we foreground the psychic dimension of IESD, contrasting this with the structural and normative dimensions usually emphasized in the literature. Second, we provide empirical illustrations of the metaphorical construction of fantasmatic responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in IESD, while also pointing – in a more speculative manner – to the political significance of fantasy in shaping policy responses.

## 2. Addressing a gap in the literature: the psychic dimension in environmental politics scholarship

When assessing the impact of Covid-19 on international environmental politics (broadly understood to include governance and policy), it is important to recognize that this exercise overlaps with an assessment of these dynamics in the *absence* of Covid-19. Until 2020, much of the scholarly literature on the UN's environmental agenda adopted structurally and normatively inflected perspectives. While both of these provide important insights, they also present distinct limitations that leave certain aspects of international environmental politics underexplored.

Emphasizing a *structurally* inflected perspective means offering accounts of environmental politics in terms of economic and ecological processes. Structure is here understood to be a property of both social and natural systems. While the structural dimension of *social* life is often explicitly emphasized by scholars working within structuralist and post-structuralist traditions (Howarth 2013), it is by no means exclusive to those traditions. This is because the notion of social 'patterning' implied in the very idea of a social *system*, whether economic, cultural or otherwise, tends to find a place in any study interested in exploring the way power stabilizes social relations. Structure is also a feature of *natural* systems, as philosophers and historians of science, such as Thomas Kuhn (1969) and Imre Lakatos (1974), have long pointed out. And this means that natural processes or mechanisms, may sometimes find themselves in conflict or tension not only with other natural processes but also with social processes, whether economic, social or otherwise, and *vice versa*. Thus, scholars who emphasize the structural dimension might argue that the UN is often not transparent about the degree of socio-structural change required to implement its sustainability agenda (Biermann et al. 2023), nor about the difficult trade-offs that states, organizations, and individuals must navigate between planet, people, and profit (Telleria 2018, 2022). Similar concerns have arisen elsewhere, such as when the Women's Major Group at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development called for socio-structural transformation, criticizing the UN for overlooking how its promotion of economic growth breaches key social and environmental limits (WMG 2019).

Emphasizing a *normatively* inflected perspective, in contrast, implies characterizing and evaluating international environmental politics primarily in relation to core values of morality and justice, asking whether the UN's environmental agenda is desirable, not merely feasible. While questions of structure are not absent, normative political theorists such as John Rawls (1971) or Michael Walzer (1983) tend to focus more on the principles of social justice and morality that *should* inform the way we organize our polity. Scholars might thus construct and critique sustainability proposals based on values embodied in one or another such principle (Manners 2024; Okereke 2006). Some challenge whether the UN identifies the problem correctly, arguing that the anthropocentric values framing ecological crises should be reconsidered from a more-than-human perspective (Cameron 2023). Others point to value pluralism, insisting that reasonable people may disagree about the best path forward (Kütting 2014), for instance, in debates over which fuels should be considered transitional energy sources (Sovacool et al. 2020). From this perspective, the UN may be criticized for oversimplifying the moral and political complexities of sustainability (Gilroy 2004; Litfin 2003).

So far we have suggested that the structural dimension is associated with (socio-economic and natural) processes, while the normative dimension is associated with values embodied in principles of morality and social justice. It is of course important to acknowledge that these two dimensions are not so easy to separate out in practice. Marxist and other critical perspectives, for example, clearly embody distinct articulations of these two dimensions. At the same time, however, it is often one or the other dimension that tends to dominate explanations that try to grasp specific phenomena. It is therefore worth keeping in mind how privileging one dimension over another can become a feature of a particular study, as regards that study's governing character and orientation. Our view is that perspectives rooted in either the structural or normative dimension offer insights into the strengths and limitations of international environmental politics, which can, in turn, also inform more strategically-oriented analyses of environmental crises (e.g. Klein 2014; Malm 2020). However, we also argue that, on the whole, these studies have largely neglected the role played by the unconscious (Samuels 2015). To address this gap, we highlight how the *psychic* dimension also informs and is informed by environmental politics, alongside structural and normative dimensions (see Table 1 and Figure 1; see also Hurtado Hurtado and Glynos 2025). In using the qualifier 'psychic,' we draw on psychoanalysis – a tradition rooted in the work of Sigmund Freud –

**Table 1.** Structural-Normative-Psychic: a three dimensional perspective on environmental politics.

| | Structural dimension | Normative dimension | Psychic dimension |
|---|---|---|---|
| Focus | Economic and natural processes | Values, ideals, and principles of morality and justice | Unconscious processes and affective investments |
| Theories | Political Economy and Natural Sciences | Normative Theory | Psychoanalytic Theory |
| Insights | Structural sustainability tensions arising from material constraints imposed by Earth's carrying capacity upon production and consumption practices | Value-based frameworks that (can) shape responses from an environmental justice and ethics perspective | Emotional and unconscious attachments that (can) shape responses from a sustainability perspective |
| Modality | Structurally possible/probable/feasible | Normatively desirable | Psychically gripping/enjoyable |

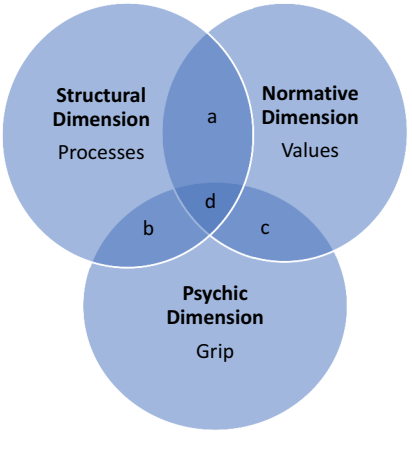


**Figure 1.** SNP schema: intersections of structural, normative, and psychic dimensions.

particularly those psycho-social scholars who emphasize how the unconscious operates beyond clinical settings. A psycho-social perspective thus draws attention to the psychic dimension of a wide range of social, political, and cultural phenomena (Frosh 2014).

Environmental politics scholars that explicitly draw on psychoanalysis stress the need to reach beyond structural and normative accounts by focusing more steadfastly on the emotional investments that inform individual and collective responses to environmental crises. They do so by deploying psychoanalytic concepts such as anxiety (Hickman 2020), denial (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020), enjoyment (Burnham and Kingsbury 2021), disavowal (Swyngedouw 2022), and most notably fantasy (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022; Feine and Mert 2025). Focusing on the latter in particular, scholars have pointed to fantasies of victimhood, which frame environmental degradation as an external threat imposed upon passive subjects (Samuels 2015); fantasies of mastery and control, which strike a contrast with fantasies of interdependence and care (Hoggett 2020; Remling 2023; Weintrobe 2021); and fantasies of powerlessness and revenge, which reinforce cycles of inaction or destructive retaliation (Hickman 2020). For these scholars, exploring fantasies help explain policy responses as well.

Table 1 foregrounds the distinctive character of the psychic dimension, placing it alongside the normative and structural dimensions. This tabular overview shows that, while psychoanalytically informed scholarship offers a valuable corrective to approaches that privilege structural or normative factors, all dimensions have a role to play in explaining political and policy responses to environmental crises. Making this complexity explicit helps contextualize scholarly work that focuses on a single dimension or intersection. Figure 1 offers a spatial representation of these dimensions.

The overlapping areas in Figure 1 helps us visualize the way dimensions might intersect in the scholarly treatment of various phenomena of environmental politics. The *structural-normative* intersection (a) might comprise debates around 'just transition,' where structural constraints (e.g. fossil fuel dependency, economic disruption, employment shifts) meet normative claims for social justice (e.g. equitable access to resources, fair distribution of transformation burdens and benefits) (Stevis and Felli 2020). The *structural-psychic* intersection (b) might speak to the way we embrace highly contested technologies such as geoengineering, which capitalize on subjects' anxiety about structural limitations linked to resource depletion and planetary boundaries (Gupta et al. 2020). The *normative-psychic intersection* (c) might capture the way collective guilt linked to subjects' complicity in ecological degradation drives emotional investment in normative ideals such as intergenerational justice and climate reparations (Kleres and Wettergren 2017). Finally, the *structural-normative-psychic intersection* (d) might capture how fantasies inflect our normatively co-constituted structural accounts of the planet (Hurtado Hurtado and Glynos 2025).

This three-dimensional perspective enables us to see how much existing work on environmental politics already ventures beyond single-dimensional analyses, focusing on one or another of these intersections (areas a, b, c, d), thus making explicit their multifaceted, co-constitutive character. From this point of view, a comprehensive understanding of political proposals to address the pandemic in an environmentally-informed fashion might emerge when structural considerations (economic stimulus, infrastructure),

normative values (equity, ecological responsibility), and psychic investments (fantasies of renewal, transformative hope, anxieties about regression) are examined together (d).

Keeping this three-dimensional perspective in mind, in what follows, we focus specifically on the relatively underexplored psychic dimension. To do so, we turn to political discourse theory, which allows us to situate unconscious and affective processes within a broader discursive context.

## 3. Theory and research strategy: a critical fantasy studies approach

Political discourse theory draws on the work of Laclau and Mouffe, particularly their seminal *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Responding to the crises of Marxism through the 20th century, they developed a 'post-Marxist' approach that, drawing on Gramsci and (especially continental) contemporaneous political philosophy, foregrounded the ineliminable role of context and contingency in shaping political strategy. While *structural* and *normative* dimensions remained central to their outlook, they argued that the failures of the Left and other progressive projects necessitated a decisive break from economic determinism, the idea that economic structures and tendencies alone dictate historical outcomes. Instead, they highlighted the constitutive role discourses play in shaping social and political-strategic practices. As the title of one of Laclau's books suggests, the 'rhetorical foundations of society' are both ontologically and strategically non-trivial (Laclau 2014). From this perspective, crises are not reducible to causal tendencies or structural contradictions, because social and political developments are always-already discursively and thus rhetorically mediated. Discursive articulation is therefore central to strategic analysis. Rather than an epiphenomenon of underlying causes, a crisis is understood by them as a *dislocation* (discussed below).

Inspired by Lacan, political discourse theory also recognizes that processes of discursive re-articulation cannot be fully grasped without attending to unconsciously inflected affective investments. These investments do more than energize performances of articulation; they orient desires in particular normative directions. Recognizing the role of emotions and unconscious processes – what we aim to grasp with the term *psychic dimension* – is thus essential for understanding the constitution of social and political reality (Laclau and Stavrakakis 2010; Mouffe 1993, 2013). Some political discourse theory scholars have explored the psychic dimension through the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy, to better grasp how subjects become affectively attached to particular identities and ideological formations (Glynos 2001; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016; Stavrakakis 1999), particularly in critical and interpretive approaches to policy analysis (Howarth 2010; Howarth and Griggs 2015; West 2011; Hawkins and Schalkwyk 2024; Tervasmäki 2025; see also van Hulst et al. 2024). Indeed, the psychoanalytic turn – visible already in Laclau and Mouffe (1985) – has directly inspired the emergence of critical fantasy studies as a distinct theoretical frontier of political discourse theory (Behagel and Mert 2021; Glynos 2021; Remling 2023), clarifying the specific role of the psychic dimension as distinct from other dimensions.

Political discourse theory has been widely used to analyze local environmental resistance (Griggs and Howarth 2023; Mert 2019; Montessori 2009), and international environmental discourse (Stavrakakis 1997; Methmann 2010; Mert 2015; Remling 2020).

Psychoanalytic concepts, notably fantasy, have also been used to analyze environmental policy discourse (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017; Remling 2023; Stavrakakis 2000; Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022; Feine and Mert 2025). While engagement with the psychic dimension is growing, its relation to broader political and policy dynamics remains under-theorized, and political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies have yet to inform analyses of the pandemic's impact on IESD. The next section presents a framework to help fill this gap.

## 3.1. Analytical framework

This paper advances political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies scholarship by developing an analytical framework for unpacking the psychic dimension through four interrelated concepts: dislocation, fantasy, metaphor, and galvanizing motif. The framework clarifies the nature and political relevance of the psychic dimension of IESD following the pandemic. We elaborate on each concept below.

### 3.1.1. Dislocation: moments of rupture and contingency

Dislocation refers to moments of rupture that expose how the socio-symbolic order is constitutively open and thus contingent, creating opportunities for political rearticulation (Laclau 1990). For many scholars, Covid-19 served as a paradigmatic case of dislocation, disrupting entrenched social, economic, and political practices worldwide, affecting taken-for-granted patterns of behavior, and pointing to the way our practices were deeply sedimented in particular (contingent) ways (Kaminskas 2023; Klopf and Nabers 2024; Mert and Remling 2023). From this point of view, the Covid-19 crisis disrupted an entire regime of practices, provoking widespread anxiety and uncertainty, exposing vulnerabilities in public health, economic interdependence, and global governance, but also forcing a broader reconsideration of priorities, including work-life balance, public health, and environmental policies. In this context, some narratives emerged that sought to frame the crisis as a temporary disruption that would soon see a return to business 'as usual,' while other narratives sought to present the crisis as an opportunity for transformation, captured in affectively charged slogans such as 'Build Back Better' or 'Green Recovery.' These competing interpretive frames illustrate how dislocation is not just a moment of breakdown but also a site of political struggle where new discourses appear, including – as we will go on to show – the fantasies that underlie them.

### 3.1.2. Fantasy: the framing of desire and affect

The ontological significance of dislocation lies in the fact that it reveals the precarity of the socio-symbolic order, destabilizing deeply ingrained interpretations of the world. As beings who navigate reality through discourse and meaning, we often experience such disruptions as a source of anxiety, as they challenge the habitual ways through which we make sense of our surroundings. We follow recent scholarship that treats fantasy as a narrative framing device that enables us to cope with such anxiety, serving as the 'glue' that knits together and helps sustain a coherent interpretation of the world, furnishing us with a sense of 'ontological security' (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020; Biswas Mellamphy, Girard, and Campbell 2022; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022). Fantasies thus dramatize how we cope with the anxiety triggered by dislocation, by mobilizing

representations of perceived threats, imagined ideal futures (or nostalgic pasts), and obstacles or enemies to be overcome. They comprise both beatific and horrific elements: ideals that inspire pursuit, and fears to be kept at bay (Remling 2018). In the context of IESD, fantasies help constitute our understandings of nature (Behagel and Mert 2021), human/non-human relations (Feine and Mert 2025), and broader environmental imaginaries (Hurtado Hurtado and Glynos 2025), thereby framing what is achievable, desirable, necessary, or inevitable regarding ecological crises and sustainability.

Fantasy, at its core, stages our deepest attachments to others and our environment, structuring our desires and affective investments through which we experience enjoyment, pleasure and pain. Yet because fantasies are rarely explicit – often remaining embedded in practices and discourses – their analysis demands that we reconstruct and articulate them as such (Glynos 2021; Howarth 2010).

### *3.1.3. Metaphor: the affective scaffolding of fantasy*

Given its elusiveness, fantasy must be carefully operationalized. Metaphor provides a useful scaffolding concept, as it often marks points of affective investment, offering clues about how to construct underlying fantasmatic narratives provoked by dislocations. This brings discourse, emotion, affect, fantasy, and the unconscious into play. As Lacan observed (Lacan 1998, 20) 'the unconscious is structured like a language,' suggesting that its traces appear in discourse, in texts and speeches, including metaphoric moments where affective overinvestment distorts delivery. This suggests that '[i]f affect represents the quantum of libidinal energy, we could say that [a particular] emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers' (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 267). Understanding the emotional valence of metaphors, therefore, involves connecting them to the fantasies that organize their affective force (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 267).

Focusing on metaphor is consistent with political discourse theory's broader understanding of discourse, particularly given the ontological significance Laclau attributed to rhetoric. For Laclau, discourse – and meaning as its ontological horizon – is *constitutive* of human action as such. He argues that the mobilization of rhetorical tropes, 'far from being a mere adornment of a social reality which could be described in non-rhetorical terms, can be seen as the very logic of the constitution of political identities' (Laclau 2005, 19). Metaphor plays a key role here, as it 'establishes a relation of substitution between terms on the basis of the principle of analogy' (ibid). Rhetorical political theorists make similar claims, noting that '[m]etaphors, analogies, metonyms and synecdoches are … powerful devices for stylistically shaping not just the tone but also the content of an argument, because they permit speakers to redescribe situations, objects, agents or experiences in selective ways that subtly shape how judgements about them are to be made' (Martin 2014, 80).

Metaphors are particularly prominent in discourses about environmental crises, where phrases such as 'minute before midnight,' 'sleepwalking over a cliff,' and 'tipping points' are commonly articulated. Rhetorical devices, however, are not neutral; metaphors help *constitute* emotions associated with environmental crises through the selective articulation of content using particular terms (Finlayson 2007). Saying we are 'sleepwalking over a cliff' is not merely to describe a state of affairs and separately evoke the emotion of worry and concern, but helps *constitute* how we experience environmental crises *as* an experience of worry or concern.

Metaphorical content orients actors toward specific normative and policy directions. 'Buying time' or 'waking up and educating ourselves,' for example, point to distinct

responses and can affectively and normatively 'prime' policy-makers, politicians and the public, shaping the emotional and political context of decision-making (Finlayson 2007; Hajer 2006; Martin 2014; Schon 1979). Critically, they do not always serve the intended purpose of those articulating them. Alarmist climate metaphors, for example, have been found to provoke paralysis rather than action (Augé 2023). In this way, tracing captivating metaphors in Covid-19 responses can point to the way fantasy structures both mode and content of affective investments in IESD.

As part of our empirical analysis a focus on the metaphoric construction of fantasies thus becomes a key means of accessing the psychic dimension of IESD during the pandemic. Below we highlight one prominent fantasy underpinning IESD – the 'war and peace' fantasy – constructed through a series of metaphoric interventions by UN actors and their circulation in associated documents and media.

### *3.1.4. Galvanizing motifs*

The final concept in our analytical framework is the galvanizing motif, a discursive device through which fantasies gain politically relevant expression. We can define it as a phrase or expression (hence: motif) that takes its cue from a vague sense of dissatisfaction, articulating it, however, in a way that gives the addressee a feeling of hope that motivates action of some sort (hence: galvanizing). Drawing on Laclau's notion of the empty signifier (Laclau 1996), with which it shares key affinities, we position this concept as a contribution to and dialogue with political discourse theory. Signifiers such as 'Freedom' or 'Justice for All,' for example, often serve as exemplar empty signifiers, particularly when functioning as rallying points around which political struggles are organized. While they typically signal dissatisfaction with the ways things are in the present (a lack of freedom or justice) and express an aspiration for a better future, empty signifiers are typically rather open-ended ('empty') as regards how such expressed aspirations should be achieved.

Like empty signifiers, then, galvanizing motifs function as 'enablers' of articulatory processes, representing unity in affirmation and difference in interpretation. It is notable, for example, that during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the pandemic, most people would affirm the value of a particular galvanizing motif such as 'Build Back Green,' even if they might disagree about the concrete meaning that should be attributed to it. Unlike empty signifiers, however, galvanizing motifs are not conceptualized as formally linked to the process by which alliances or coalitions of actors are constructed (in what Laclau calls chains of equivalence). In other words, a galvanizing motif, unlike an empty signifier, is not always connected to, or in search of, a social force that can embody it. In addition, while open-ended, galvanizing motifs can be said to offer greater normative direction than an empty signifier, thus carrying more tangible political and policy import. In sum, we conceptualize galvanizing motifs as vehicles through which the affective energy associated with fantasmatic desire gets transmitted, giving it greater political traction.

## 4. Analyzing IESD in the wake of Covid-19: from metaphor to fantasy

Having outlined our analytical framework, we now illustrate how the psychic dimension of IESD emerged during Covid-19. Our analysis draws on data from a set of kindred projects, combining virtual and in-person participatory observations at key UN sustainability platforms and in-depth interviews with experts, delegates, business representatives, and

**Table 2.** Empirical material in context.

| | Main empirical material | Contextualising material |
|---|---|---|
| Official documents | - Secretary-General's remarks at G-20 Virtual Summit on the COVID-19 Pandemic: *This war needs a war-time plan to fight it*. 26 March 2020.<br>- Secretary-General's address to the Ministerial Segment of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF): *'Turn tide' across turbulent world*. 14 June 2020.<br>- Secretary-General's message on International Mother Earth Day. 22 April 2020.<br>- Secretary-General's address at Columbia University: *The State of the Planet*. 2 December 2020.<br>- UN Sustainable Development Group. *Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the SocioEconomic Impacts of COVID19*. 31 March 2020.<br>- Procedures for taking decisions (A/74/544) and holding elections (A/74/L.67) during COVID-19<br>- Draft ministerial declaration of HLPF 2020. 17 July 2020<br>- UN/DESA Policy Brief #84: *Achieving SDGs in the wake of COVID19* 31 August 2020.<br>- UN/DESA Policy Brief #85: *Impact of COVID19* 14 September 2020<br>- Ministerial Declaration of HLPF 2021. 9 July 2021 | Official UN documents referencing these texts; Drafts of, and outcome documents of, Oceans, Climate, Biodiversity meetings and the Stockholm+50 Summit. |
| Video material | UN Video Channel:<br>- Nations United: Urgent Solutions for Urgent Times. 19 September 2020.<br>- Guterres: COVID-19 and Fragile States. 12 October 2021.<br>- Guterres: Declare War on this Virus. 13 March 2020.<br>- Guterres: COVID-19 and misinformation. 14 April 2020.<br>- Guterres: The effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children. 16 April 2020.<br>UNEP Video Channel:<br>- Coronavirus - A message from nature. 2 April 2020.<br>- Guterres - Champions of the Earth 2020. 11 December 2020. | News coverage of these statements and grey literature referencing them. (e.g. NGO responses and reports, UN reports, and policy documents). |
| Participatory observations | - HLPF 2020, Online, 07–16 July 2020.<br>- HLPF 2021, (Virtual Component), 06–15 July 2021.<br>- HLPF 2023, (Virtual Component), 10–19 July 2023.<br>- Stockholm+50, Stockholm, 02–3 June 2022.<br>- Global Goals Webinar Series, featuring eight sessions led by authors of the *SDG Impact Assessment*, Cambridge University Press, 2022. (GLOBALGOALS Project, Utrecht University)<br>- The Summit of the Future, New York, 21–23 September 2024.<br>- The 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), Glasgow, 01–13 December 2021.<br>- The One Ocean Summit, Brest/Online, 09–11 February 2022.<br>- The 9th Annual World Ocean Summit Virtual Week, *The Economist Impact*, 01–4 March 2022.<br>- Online stakeholder engagement on the zero draft (in preparation for 2nd UN Oceans Conference), 23 March 2022.<br>- KunmingMontreal COP 15.2 to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal, 07–19 December 2022.<br>- COP16 to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, Cali, 21.10- 1 November 2024. | |

(*Continued*)

**Table 2.** (Continued).

| | Main empirical material | Contextualising material |
|---|---|---|
| Interviews | Overall number of interviews: 3 Business Representatives, 10 Delegates, 19 Experts, 22 (non-business) Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS)<br>- Oceans Meetings: 3 MGoS, 4 Experts<br>- Climate COP: 5 Delegates, 4 Experts, 6 MGoS<br>- HLPF Meetings: 4 Experts, 4 MGoS<br>- Biodiversity COPs: 3 Business, 3 Experts, 7 MGoS, 3 Delegates<br>- Other Summits: 2 MGoS, 4 Experts | |

representatives from non-business Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS). This situates the UN at the center of our analysis – not only as a barometer of international mood or an institution shaping IESD, but also as a complex arena that convenes diverse actors, including grassroots and marginalized communities engaged in environmental politics beyond the UN (see Table 2 for an overview of the empirical material).

In our analysis below we mainly refer to UN official documents released in 2020, but the bulk of our empirical material comes from public statements by prominent UN figures disseminated through videos and other media, particularly those by the UN Secretary-General. Contextualizing media sources containing statements by official UN figures or figures strongly associated with UN policy fora, include news reports with wide circulation within and beyond national boundaries, such as those appearing in *The Guardian*. Such statements help us unpack the psychic dimension of IESD because they offer opportunities for these figures to bypass the often rather constrained, dry, diplomatic formulations of policy targets and processes in official documents. Their capacity to capture affective investment (and thus logics of the unconscious) was especially evident in the charged pronouncements in the video material and public speeches released during the first six months of the pandemic, and in the forewords of various official publications. These pronouncements received considerable media attention that arguably influenced national and political debates during 2020–22, as well as NGO and other policy reports that referenced them in the years that followed.

In approaching this empirical material, our illustrative discourse analytical interpretive strategy aimed to draw out key 'assumptions or presuppositions about human nature and social reality,' including 'organizational structures' (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991, 68). We adopted a retroductive method (Glynos and Howarth 2019), moving between analytical framework and data, by immersing ourselves in the empirical material in dialogue with political discourse theory, and allowing signifying patterns to emerge that we could interpret as instances of metaphors, fantasies, and galvanizing motifs. We focused on the metaphorical language deployed by key UN figures, particularly when repeated across different occasions and fora. The affective charge of these metaphors offered insight into underlying logics of desire, which we reconstructed as fantasmatic narratives, linking them to galvanizing motifs. This approach illustrates how fantasy can be constructed and mobilized, thereby elucidating the psychic dimension of IESD and its political significance.

One important finding from our analysis concerns not just the identity of the dramatic metaphors appearing in the empirical material, but also their chronological emergence. As shown below, the 'being at war' metaphor dominates the pandemic's early stages, later giving way to a 'wake-up call' metaphor. We now turn to these metaphors in greater detail, showing how they enable us to sketch out the contours of a prominent 'war and peace' fantasy.

### *4.1. 'Being at war' metaphor: Covid-19 as an invisible enemy*

On 26 March 2020, as the unusual speed and scale of the Covid-19 pandemic became evident, a metaphor was thrust into the global limelight when UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (UN 2020a) and World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (WHO 2020) declared that 'We are at war with a virus.' This rhetoric echoed national leaders such as Xi Jinping, who called for a 'people's war' against

Covid-19 (Xinhua News Agency 2020), and Donald Trump, who invoked the *Defense Production Act*, framing ventilators and protective equipment as essential for 'national defense' (CNN 2020). The metaphor was repeated by European leaders: Emmanuel Macron (2020) stated six times that 'France is at war,' Merkel (2020) compared the pandemic to World War II, and Boris Johnson (2020) declared himself head of a 'wartime government.' In the following months, numerous leaders adopted wartime metaphors to justify emergency measures, invoking legal and political wartime exceptions to their country's respective laws to address the unusual conditions of the pandemic.

This 'being at war' metaphor carried two notable political implications. The first is the fairly obvious one of securitizing the crisis, thus molding it into a familiar template that promises the reassertion of control at a time of limited information, analysis, or understanding of a developing situation. It also imposes a logic of urgency, authority, and discipline, limiting democratic debate and making it harder to challenge restrictions on civil liberties or hold leaders accountable. Interestingly, the second implication, highlighted by the feminist movement, pushes back against the first. Already in March 2020 and increasingly thereafter, feminists attuned to the potentially harmful implications of war rhetoric, argued that securitization narratives often fuel authoritarian tendencies (along with sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and secrecy). They contrasted these with care-oriented narratives foregrounding solidarity and social justice as the qualities needed in a pandemic (Enloe 2023; Horsford and Jerlström 2020). The feminist critique resonated with ecofeminist arguments, which draw parallels between man's 'war' against nature and his subjugation of marginalized groups, framing the ecological crises as an extension of domination-based worldviews.

In mobilizing key emotions like fear and guarded hope, the 'being at war' metaphor in Covid-19 responses thus not only functioned as a means to manage the crisis, it also served as a political and ideological instrument, shaping how power, recovery, and justice were framed in its aftermath.

### 4.2. 'Wake-up call' metaphor: the pandemic as a symptom of the ecological crises

By late 2020, the war metaphor used to describe Covid-19 began evolving into a broader critique of humanity's relationship with nature. In his *State of the Planet* address, Guterres (2020a) lamented that 'humanity is waging war on nature,' pointing to biodiversity loss, global heating, and ecosystem destruction as evidence. He thus positioned Covid-19 as an ecological warning rather than merely a health emergency, and our war with the virus as a symptom of an older and more troubling conflict. This shift resonated with a set of related metaphors circulated by UN figures, framing the pandemic as an 'unprecedented wake-up call' (Guterres 2020b), as a 'message from nature' (UNEP Channel 2020a), and 'an SOS signal for the human enterprise' (Dasgupta and Andersen 2020). Thus, rather than making 'wet markets' and 'bushmeat' the targets of critique, terms specifically used when referring to the global South (Malm 2020), UN figures sought to redirect public attention toward the wider ecological crisis.

The 'wake-up call' metaphor thus presented the virus as a symptom rather than an enemy, an idea that quickly gained ground in a wide variety of settings. The adoption of this metaphor in its various iterations carried important political implications because it reframed the normative and structural horizons of IESD. Reifying the virus as the target of

our war efforts can produce political and policy responses akin to those associated with the 'war on drugs' metaphor in the USA, which framed narcotics as the problem rather than looking toward their deeper socio-economic drivers. Viewing the pandemic instead as a consequence of humans' persistent war on nature clearly carries a distinct set of political and policy implications.

For instance, Laurent Fabius, former French Foreign Minister and President of the 2015 Paris Climate Change negotiations, claimed that '[t]here is no vaccine against climate warming.' Reinforcing the analogy, he then added that there is, however, 'an antidote, which is to fully implement the Paris Agreement' (The Guardian 2020b). Since then, the pandemic and ecological crises have been linked in multiple ways: by equating their severity and impact, by identifying common root causes such as capitalism (Malm 2020) or growth-oriented economic models (De Vogli 2023), and by interpreting them as 'revenge effects' of ecological destruction, wherein nature responds to human exploitation in unpredictable and catastrophic ways (Hornborg 2021). This shift in metaphoric reframing is therefore crucial. It helps orient IESD away from a crisis management frame (promoted through the 'being at war' metaphor) toward a more general systems frame (promoted through the 'wake-up call' metaphor), able to see Covid-19 not as an isolated disaster, but as a product of broader patterns of unsustainable human activity. In short, while the 'being at war' metaphor constructed the virus as a main target, the 'wake-up call' metaphor re-framed the virus as the symptom of a deeper malaise.

### *4.3. 'War and peace' fantasy*

Affectively charged metaphors in high-level UN environmental discourse hint at logics of desire underpinning fantasies encompassing collective attitudes toward nature. Having noted this chronological shift to the 'wake-up call' metaphor we can now reconstruct the fantasy that shapes its emotional tenor. The focus shifts from a *war against the virus* to a protracted *war with nature*. The metaphor that treats the Covid-19 virus as a symptom rather than a cause prevails as the pandemic unfolds, signaling the reconfiguration of underlying desires. Guterres signals this turn in his calling for 'a peace plan and a post-war rebuilding programme' (UNEP 2021, 4). We suggest that this metaphoric shift made possible the articulation of peace with nature, giving form to the 'war and peace' fantasy.

As early as March 2020, UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen urged that nature be seen as 'our strongest ally' in meeting the immense challenges ahead, arguing that 'we are intimately interconnected with nature [. . . and that] if we don't take care of nature, we can't take care of ourselves' (Dasgupta and Andersen 2020). This statement advances an ontological claim that human and ecological well-being are fundamentally intertwined. Dasgupta and Andersen's assertion expresses both a hope and a wager: that humanity might reshape its collective worldview and redefine its place within nature. This sentiment also appeared in our interviews. One respondent, asked to imagine a future linked to the oceans, described 'happy people [and] happy fish . . . Wild, like the wildness that is present in the environment, but calm, as in there's peace in a relationship that is fostered between the natural environment and [our] dependence on it' (in Feine and Mert 2025: 587).

Despite its abstract formulation, the affirmation of human-nature intertwinement carries concrete normative implications. Framed against the backdrop of a centuries-long war against nature, the call to 'make peace with nature' emerges as 'the defining task

of the 21st century, [and] the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere' (Guterres 2020a). Similarly, the 2020 draft High-level Political Form on Sustainable Development Ministerial Declaration (no final document was adopted due to procedural complications arising from the virtual format) articulates a vision of 'a world in which humanity lives in harmony with nature' (UN ECOSOC 2020, 5). Building on this, Guterres urges humanity to 'act boldly and urgently to repair our relationship with nature' (UNEP Channel 2020b), positioning environmental restoration not merely as an option, but as a collective political and ethical imperative.

We can see the production of metaphors, particularly those that successfully stabilize themselves in IESD, as part of the scaffolding making up what we are calling a 'war and peace' fantasy. As fantasy, however, it does not simply sketch out a new set of ideals and obstacles, it also seeks to reset fundamental ontological assumptions about ourselves and our relation to nature. In doing so it seeks to re-wire our desires and thus our capacity to experience differently emotions linked to pleasure, pain, and enjoyment more generally. Indeed, insofar as this particular fantasy can already be said to be 'alive' in many subjects, it may help make sense of the widely reported feelings of ecological guilt and grief (Agoston et al. 2022). If we accept that this fantasy entails a fundamental affirmation of a radical human-nature intertwinement, Guterres' (UNEP 2021, 4) warning that a war on nature is 'suicidal' becomes more than 'mere rhetoric' – it carries existential weight that speaks to our collective fate.

In this section, we have traced key IESD metaphors to identify and articulate their constituent elements *as* a fantasy with which key UN figures sought to re-ground our responses to environmental crises during the pandemic. Conceived as a dislocation, the pandemic produced a discursive opening that key UN figures sought to exploit through the production of metaphors, first in order to tackle a real emergency (through the metaphor of 'being at war'), then in order to establish a link with the preceding dislocation of the environmental crises (through the 'wake-up call' metaphor), with the aim of re-activating and re-energizing it to give it new momentum toward peace with nature. As Guterres puts it:

> Humanity is waging war on nature …. The urgent need to transform our relationship with nature risks being overlooked amid the huge suffering inflicted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Saving precious lives and livelihoods is our top priority. But by exposing humanity's vulnerability, the pandemic can also help make 2021 a turning point towards a more sustainable and inclusive world …. Making peace with nature is the defining task of the coming decades. We must seize the opportunity presented by the Covid-19 crisis to accelerate change. (UNEP 2021, 4)

Having constructed the fantasy informing IESD in the immediate aftermath of Covid-19 as a fantasy of 'war and peace,' we can ask more pointed questions about its political and policy relevance.

### *4.4. Discerning the political significance of fantasy through galvanizing motifs*

As we have seen, the 'war and peace' fantasy did not emerge spontaneously but was activated and shaped by Covid-19's dislocation and metaphorically constructed over time. Key actors, who articulate – and thereby help constitute – new understandings of events

**Table 3.** Four galvanizing motifs in the aftermath of Covid-19.

| Galvanizing motif | Description |
|---|---|
| Build Back Green | - A contextual reiteration of 'Build Back Better'<br>- Advocates green, environmentally-friendly solutions<br>- Draws attention to *environmental* sustainability |
| No Going Back to Normal | - A riposte to the desire to return to a flawed pre-Covid 'normal'<br>- Advocates environmentally-progressive change<br>- Pushes for recognition of past mistakes and problems |
| Leave No One Behind | - Promotes solidarity by emphasizing collective safety: 'No one is safe until everyone is' (Epidemiological medical aspects)<br>- Extends the meaning of safety beyond its epidemiological, medical signification to cover social, economic and environmental justice concerns<br>- Highlights the importance of inclusive and holistic solutions |
| We Are All in This Together | - Promotes solidarity by emphasizing sense of unity and collective effort<br>- Advocates a more equal and environmentally-friendly future<br>- Moves from a negative assessment of the status quo to a more hopeful and inclusive future prospect |

and our responses to them, borrow from existing discourses to suture the rupture exposed by the dislocation. In the case of UN institutions, we find attempts by leading figures to discursively align their response to the pandemic with preexisting environmental sustainability discourses, whether dominant ones, such as the 2030 Agenda, or marginal ones, such as the climate justice movement discourses.

Vehicles through which the 'war and peace' fantasy can be transmitted to environmental policy fora include a range of galvanizing motifs (Table 3), which we only briefly touch upon. These motifs, all of which predate the pandemic, were strategically re-articulated and widely circulated to anchor and legitimize sustainability-oriented policy responses to the Covid-19 dislocation. Among the most prominent are: 'Build Back Green,' 'No Going Back to Normal,' 'Leave No One Behind,' and 'We Are All in This Together.' While this list of galvanizing motifs is not meant to be exhaustive, it serves to demonstrate the symbolic meshwork that can emerge and coalesce around a dislocation.

'Build Back Green' is a contextual re-articulation of the broader 'Build Back Better' slogan, refining its direction by explicitly emphasizing the necessity of environmental imperatives in post-pandemic recovery efforts. The 'No Going Back to Normal' motif, in contrast, functions primarily as a riposte to the wish (and promise) frequently expressed by national political leaders to swiftly return to pre-pandemic normalcy once the worst effects of Covid-19 subsided. Emphasizing the *un*desireability of returning to any 'normal' responsible for the ecological crisis, the 'No Going Back to Normal' motif carried great potential from an environmentally progressive viewpoint (UN 2020b). Similarly, 'Leave No One Behind' is capacious enough to allow for a layered interpretation that extends its meaning beyond a focus on epidemiological-medical aspects, forging connections to economic and environmental justice. Arguably, 'Leave No One Behind''s re-articulation is also supported by another motif that gained popularity during the peak of Covid-19, namely, 'We Are All in This Together,' which shifts the emphasis toward the hopeful prospect of a more equal and environmentally-friendly future together, specifically noting the 2030 Agenda as the way forward in responding to future pandemics and climate catastrophes.

We suggest that more detailed analyses of such motifs might reveal the way affective energies of the 'war and peace' fantasy get channeled into concrete policy formulations and outcomes. 'Build Back Green,' for example, already signals some form of reconciliation with nature, as indicated in a 2021 UNEP/ACP-MEAs policy paper on sustainable development, which highlighted the need for 'building peace and resilience in dealing with environmental challenges' (Pisupati 2021, 2). Or, in relation to 'No Going Back to Normal,' we find Arundhati Roy's (2020) (now) famous words: 'Nothing could be worse than a return to normality,' which emphasized that pre-pandemic normality was responsible for accelerating climate breakdown and global inequality (350 Africa.org 2020).

As a galvanizing motif, then, 'No Going Back to Normal' – like 'Build Back Green' – can be understood as a rallying cry that sought to use the crisis as an opportunity for transformation. It reframed the pandemic as a moment of reckoning, signaling the need for a break from past governance failures in favor of more equitable and sustainable modes of being. It resonates with, and can thus carry, the affective energies underlying the 'war and peace' fantasy that affirm the need to confront a deep malaise linked to our broken relation to nature. Indeed, as early as 2020, the abovementioned 'just recovery' report underscored how the pandemic had 'exposed deep vulnerabilities in social and economic systems,' arguing that human *and* planetary health must be prioritized in post-pandemic recovery (350 Africa.org 2020, 5). From a critical fantasy studies perspective, galvanizing motifs such as 'No Going Back to Normal' and 'Build Back Green' can transmit the normative framing, ontological commitments, and affective energies associated with the 'war and peace' fantasy. They point to our broken relation to nature, understood in terms of our affective investments in problematic production and consumption practices, desires, and enjoyments. But they also point to an alternative normative vision grounded in an ontological commitment to the more-than-human. The fantasy of 'war and peace' might thus be mobilized by discursive entrepreneurs through galvanizing motifs, using them as vehicles through which to re-wire the circuits of desire and enjoyment differently, in a way that can make peace with nature and ensure a reciprocally-supportive coexistence.

## 5. Concluding discussion

Drawing on dislocation as a central category in political discourse theory, this paper turned to metaphor and galvanizing motif to argue that fantasy offers a useful lens for understanding the psychic dimension's character and political import in IESD in the wake of Covid-19. A key motivation for turning to political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies was the need to better theorize this dimension which in the literature remains either underexplored or, where it does receive attention, its connection to political and policy dynamics is under-specified. Our first contribution is to the study of international environmental politics. In developing a three-dimensional (Structural-Normative-Psychic) perspective, we reveal previous literatures' tendency to focus predominantly on the structural and normative dimensions of international environmental politics, thus marginalizing or neglecting the psychic dimension. Structural factors shaping practices such as production and consumption, and the normative values informing our sustainability visions are both critical to our understanding of responses to dislocations such as ecological crises and global pandemics. However, exploring how we are affectively

invested in structural processes and normative ideals is equally crucial. Without an appreciation of the desires and enjoyments embodied in our present and future practices, the challenge faced by those advocating for structural and normative transformation will be misunderstood, underestimated, and important strategic considerations for achieving change may be missed. Using the concept of fantasy, we have sketched out one way the psychic dimension's character can be grasped, and how its significance can be better appreciated in its own right. Our paper thus opens up a dialogue between political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies scholarship and environmental politics research that tends to emphasize the structural and normative dimensions.

Our second contribution is to psycho-social studies, by drawing out more clearly the political and policy implications of the psychic dimension, both conceptually and methodologically. To do this, we drew on and further developed key concepts in political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies, comprising our analytical framework for unpacking the psychic dimension: dislocation, metaphor, fantasy, and galvanizing motif. Affectively invested metaphors served as important conceptual and methodological devices through which we reconstructed fantasy in the wake of the Covid-19 dislocation. Regarding the political import of fantasy, we suggested galvanizing motifs can serve as vehicles through which the affective energies of fantasmatic desire and enjoyment can be transmitted. Inspired by, though distinct from, the better-known political discourse theory concept of empty signifier, we argued that galvanizing motifs, such as 'Build Back Green' and 'No Going Back to Normal' can – through appropriate articulatory efforts – be attuned to different fantasies, amplifying their resonance with underlying affective energies. In other words, though this paper examined how the 'war and peace' fantasy, in particular, was metaphorically constructed in IESD in the aftermath of COVID19, other fantasies and their attendant affective energies can emerge, depending on the conjunctural moment at stake, including adjacent political discourses and articulatory entrepreneurs. Indeed, more generally, our analytical framework, in conjunction with the three-dimensional (Structural-Normative-Psychic) perspective, provides a means to engage productively with the turn to emotions and affect in international environmental politics (e.g. Badri 2024; Durnová et al. 2025; Singh 2025; Ventsel and Selg 2025), from a political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies viewpoint.

The main thrust of this paper has been exploratory and illustrative in its conceptual elaborations, so before we conclude it is worth reflecting on the wider critical and strategic implications of our intervention, and to consider what avenues for future research it opens up. For example, despite its mobilizing rhetorical force, we may query the chances of 'Build Back Green' and 'No Going Back to Normal' to disrupt rather than reproduce pre-pandemic governance logics. And even if they succeed in reaffirming and re-energizing the 2030 Agenda as the guiding blueprint for sustainability, we would still need to reckon with the latter's well-documented shortcomings (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2022). By channeling a fantasmatically-invested 'peace'-ful reconciliation with nature and resolution of post-pandemic anxieties, might 'Build Back Green' and 'No Going Back to Normal' thus obfuscate deeper structural obstacles to progress and thus help stabilize belief in transformation without requiring fundamental shifts in governance, finance, or policy direction?

The answer to this question can only be 'yes, it might.' Certainly, meaningful transformation will not take place without clear normative and structural

commitments to green recovery plans, social protections, regulatory changes, and so on. Early on, the European Think Tanks Group warned that while historical crises can open windows for systemic reform, these moments can and often are used to reinforce existing power structures (Pantuliano 2020). It is precisely at this point that the distinctiveness of the psychic dimension can be best appreciated. From the perspective of the psychic dimension, what a particular articulation of 'Build Back Green' and 'No Going Back to Normal' might obfuscate is not the 'real' economic processes shaping our production and consumption practices, nor the 'right' values we should embrace, but rather the way we are fantasmatically invested in unsustainable structures and values. Of course, confronting and transforming our fantasmatic investments in current structures and values will not necessarily result in the transformation of those practices. Yet, appreciating the distinctive character and force of the psychic dimension can serve as an important theoretical and strategic pre-condition for such structural and normative transformations.

Even if talk of a 'wake-up call' to the raging 'war on nature' is meant to convey a sense of urgency, suggesting we take collective responsibility for our economic systems, colonial histories, or modern consumption practices, such talk does not necessarily or automatically translate into meaningful action or policy. This tension between abstract aspiration and concrete reality is evident in the Hollywood star-studded UN video (UN Channel 2021), *Nations United: Urgent Solutions for Urgent Times*, which asks: 'As a species, are we going to be able to work together urgently to solve this?' While reinforcing urgency and the need for global cooperation, pitching the question at such a high level of abstraction can appear rather impotent if it does not reckon with existing, rather firmly entrenched, neoliberal policy regimes and practices that are supported by fantasies of mastery and control, or fantasies of individual self-sufficiency. Moreover, despite their usefulness as intermediate-level discursive vehicles through which fantasmatic narratives and their affective energies can be transmitted, galvanizing motifs demand further study. The detail of their character and the relative success of their installation cannot be satisfactorily established without drilling down into the concrete political and ideological battles played out in clearly specified norm domains or policy fields, linked for example to climate change, biodiversity, or ocean governance. Future research could be instrumental in understanding this detail, including the role played by grassroots actors and marginalized communities in contesting or defending particular norms. Fantasies can thus become more tangible by showing in a finer-grained manner how they shape not only the political narratives advanced in those fields, but also the affective and ideological commitments that sustain them in a hostile environment conditioned by the structural, normative, and psychic dimensions of a hegemonic *status quo*.

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## Notes on contributors

***Jason Glynos*** is a professor of social and political theory at the Department of Government, University of Essex, where he is co-director of the Centre for Ideology and Discourse Analysis (cIDA) and Essex Chair of the DeSiRe network (Democracy, Signification and Representation).

***Ayşem Mert*** is Senior Lecturer of Environmental Politics at the Department of Political Science, Stockholm University. She employs psychoanalytic and interpretive methods, especially political discourse theory and critical fantasy studies to explore discourses, practices, and future imaginaries of democracy and sustainability.

***Jelle Behagel*** is associate professor with the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group (FNP) of Wageningen University, the Netherlands. He coordinates the special Master track on Sustainable Development Diplomacy.

***Dr Elise Remling*** is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Canberra. Working at the intersection of human geography, political, and social sciences, Elise's work shines a critical light on the social and political implications of climate and environmental changes and sustainability transitions, while also contributing to practical policy solutions.

## ORCID

Jason Glynos http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4801-4001
Ayşem Mert http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5105-1540
Jelle Behagel http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3997-3446
Elise Remling http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2466-3506

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