

Contesting the Future: Utopian politics and the defence of fossil fuel hegemony

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Abstract

In spite of national and corporate commitments to carbon neutrality, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase worsening climate change impacts. Within this context, climate protesters around the world are demanding a different future. In this paper, we are interested in how the fossil fuel industry and its political supporters have responded to these challenges and maintained fossil fuel hegemony. Based on interviews with influential informants from the political, lobbying and fossil fuel sectors as well as texts from media, speeches and press releases, our analysis shows how hegemony is defended by critiquing protesters' imaginaries as utopian (impossible) or dystopian (undesirable) and by constructing a conservative counter-utopia that is linked to the status quo of fossil fuel dominance. The findings explain how utopian politics is employed to defend hegemony by (i) spatially fragmenting opponents and incorporating protesters' future imaginaries within a conservative counter-utopia, and (ii) temporally constructing a pathway from the status quo to this conservative counter-utopia. Our discussion of utopian politics contributes to the literature on imaginaries by understanding how constructed futures are politically navigated, and to discussions on hegemony by explaining the expansive (spatially and temporally) discursive strategies of maintaining hegemony. We conclude by arguing for the importance of utopian thinking in addressing climate change.

Keywords

activism, climate change, dystopia, hegemony, imaginaries, utopia

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Introduction

Climate change is arguably the most significant challenge facing humanity (IPCC, 2022). Growing atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases from the last two centuries of fossil-fuelled industrialization have led to accelerated warming of the planet, causing worsening heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, storms, the melting of glaciers and sea-level rise. In response, and following the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, there has been an increase in ‘net-zero’ emissions commitments from companies and nation-states (Hale et al., 2022), and growing investment in renewable energy (IEA, 2023). Despite these political commitments to climate action, fossil fuel consumption continues to increase and, as a result, so too do the world’s carbon emissions (Nyberg et al., 2023).

The ineffectiveness of current responses has led to protests around the world, with climate scientists (T. Thompson, 2021) and environmental groups (Gardner et al., 2022) demanding more radical action. These groups warn of catastrophic futures for nations and generations, and advocate for a just transition towards a liveable planet. In response, heavy emitting industries and political leaders warn of the catastrophic economic consequences of such action and support a future of ‘green growth’ (Stuart et al., 2025). Thus, central to the debate on climate change is the imagined future and the construction of imaginary worlds (Levitas, 1991) that includes a spectrum of utopias and dystopias (C. Wright et al., 2013). Understanding this utopian politics matters not only for explaining how futures are constructed and potentially enacted (Wenzel et al., 2020), but also for showing how certain futures come to be seen as credible and legitimate.

In this paper, we are interested in understanding how utopias and dystopias are constructed for political advantage in defending the status quo; that is, the continuation of economic growth based on fossil energy in what can be termed a ‘fossil fuel hegemony’ (Nyberg et al., 2018). To understand the political dynamics of delegitimizing social demands for meaningful climate action, we investigated the Australian fossil fuel industry’s attempts to undermine alternative imaginaries. Our paper is based on an analysis of 57 semi-structured interviews conducted with senior managers from Australian coal, oil and gas companies, industry associations, corporate advisory and lobbying organizations, politicians, political advisors and union officials between 2018 and 2022. Alongside the interviews, we also analysed commentary on climate activism in major media outlets, and transcripts of speeches and public appearances by leading politicians.

Our analysis of these interviews and documents reveals the political dynamics that lead to the fossil fuel sector’s preferred future: a continuation of current practices supported by future technological innovations. The findings show how the fossil fuel hegemony critiqued protest imaginaries as a green utopian fantasy and a dark dystopian future, while promoting the status quo and a utopian technofix. More specifically, we explain how utopian politics is employed to defend hegemony by (i) spatially fragmenting opponents’ imaginaries and incorporating protesters’ imaginaries within a conservative counter-utopia and (ii) temporally constructing a pathway from the status quo to this conservative counter-utopia. Utopian politics serves as a powerful tool for sustaining fossil fuel hegemony and shaping the boundaries of plausible climate futures.

Our explanation of the dynamics underlying utopian politics contributes to discussions on imaginaries by understanding how constructed futures are politically navigated. This extends current discussions of future imaginaries (Augustine et al., 2019; De Cock et al., 2021; Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022) by showing how the rejection of critique as utopian and/or dystopian benefits the interests of dominant groups, and is thus an intrinsic part of how industries create and enact imagined futures (N. A. Thompson & Byrne, 2022; Wenzel et al., 2020). This also contributes to discussions on hegemony by explaining the expansive (spatially and temporally) discursive strategies of maintaining hegemony (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; van Bommel & Spicer, 2011). We explain how hegemony is defended by shaping which futures appear possible

and legitimate, linking present demands to a credible conservative future while dismissing alternative futures as unrealistic or harmful. Finally, we contribute to the broader discussion on the failure to act on climate change. The aim of this paper is to show that this failure is, at least partly, due to the strategies of dismissing alternative futures. By contrast, we argue that there is an urgent need to support alternative imaginaries beyond the current fossil fuel hegemony.

Hegemony: Defending the status quo

To understand the continuation of business as usual in the face of escalating climate change, we turn to the concept of hegemony. This concept has been used in the field of organization studies to understand how corporations (Barthold et al., 2024), industries (Levy & Egan, 2003) and actors within institutional fields (van Bommel & Spicer, 2011) establish or maintain dominance in political contestations. The key reference in formulating the concept of ‘hegemony’ is the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Gramsci (1971, p. 57) argued that winning a political contest without overwhelming force and coercion requires gaining consensus by providing ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ throughout society. For example, Levy and Egan (2003) illustrate how during the 1990s, the United States’ oil and automobile industries defended their hegemonic position against the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions by building a dominant coalition within the business sector and challenging the science of climate change. These political activities emphasized uncertainty around the importance of addressing climate change and derailed regulatory moves for emissions reduction. Levy and Egan (2003) show that hegemony is not simply a coalition of the willing; rather, hegemony involves a continuous process of winning the consent of key actors in forming a ruling bloc over society (Gramsci, 1971).

Building on Gramsci’s theory, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) developed the underlying ‘logic’ of the social constitution of hegemony. Hegemony is not based on class or position in societal structures (see e.g. Gramsci, 1971). For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the political force is built on contingent interests, identities and demands. For them, hegemony is both (a) the contingent social order of dominance and (b) the process of continuous negotiation, reinforcement and contestation to develop or sustain dominance. The former can be seen as a hegemonic bloc of a coalition of different political identities and sets of demands, while the latter is the process of creating this dominance. Hegemony is built on different identities and, at times, contradictory interests that are contingently held together under a common project. Hegemony is, therefore, always a process of political struggle (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Research in organization studies has engaged with Laclau and Mouffe (1985) to explain the creation and defence of hegemony (see e.g. Contu et al., 2013; Dey et al., 2016; Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; Nyberg & Wright, 2024; van Bommel & Spicer, 2011). These scholars show how the processes of hegemony are based on two strategies: (i) a construction of equivalence between heterogeneous or different demands and interests, and (ii) a construction of difference in the form of exclusion. This creates a political frontier between those interests supporting the maintenance of hegemony (equivalence) and those seen to oppose it (difference). For example, Ferns and Amaeshi (2021) show how oil major BP maintained hegemony by aligning a diverse set of interests that were held together by the meaningful and signifying discourse of ‘sustainability’. However, to succeed, this type of domination is dependent on constructing an ‘Other’, or ‘difference’, such as environmental groups (Nyberg et al., 2020) in establishing a political frontier. This is how hegemonic strategies of equivalence and difference stabilize the social field as a contingent ‘semblance of order’ (van Bommel & Spicer, 2011, p. 1721) – the different demands are linked together into an imagined unity or whole.

The neo-Gramscian analysis of hegemony has foremost considered spatial relations between actors in establishing and maintaining hegemony (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; van Bommel & Spicer, 2011) as well as the actors in the counter-hegemonic forces opposing the dominant order (Contu et al., 2013; Spicer & Böhm, 2007). Hegemonic relations are held together by mobilizing actors (van Bommel & Spicer, 2011), aligning interests (Contu et al., 2013) and incorporating stakeholder critique (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021) in a ‘war of position’ (Nyberg et al., 2018). This spatial mapping of different actors and their demands has been useful in understanding political contestations over, for example, social movements (van Bommel & Spicer, 2011), business models (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021) and factory shutdowns (Contu et al., 2013). The spatial, understood as the relationships between different actors and their interests, are clearly laid out to reveal the political logic at play.

However, this spatial mapping emphasizes the sedimentation of positions or fixity of hegemony. Undeniably, actors use temporal signifiers to create equivalence, such as ‘progress’ (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021), ‘slowness’ (van Bommel & Spicer, 2011) or ‘change’ (Dey et al., 2016), in building coalitions constituting the political space. Even so, the analysis remains fundamentally spatial in that it is concerned with how hegemonic formations stabilize meaning by arranging political demands in relational positions. The construction of equivalences that incorporate disparate demands into a hegemonic articulation, and the simultaneous production of an antagonistic other, operate as spatial practices that seek to fix the boundaries of the social. The analysis becomes ‘flat’, like a map outlining the fault lines of the political struggle. We argue that temporality is crucial for understanding hegemony because it shapes how dominant groups justify, maintain and extend their spatial dominance over and in time. The spatial construction of the relations cannot be understood without the temporal dynamics of actors’ interests or demands.

Space and time are then co-implicated in understanding the construction of social or political fields (Nyberg et al., 2022; Plotnikof & Mumby, 2024). For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), signifiers such as ‘the people’ or ‘greenies’ are discursive acts of nomination through which a political identity is constituted. The meaning of these political identities emerges through their spatial differentiation from other groups *and* their temporal distinction from past articulations, while remaining open to future contestation. The past, present and future distinction does not mean a chronological ‘clock time’ as a series of ‘nows’ that exist independently from human experience. Instead, the multimodality of time suggests that the past was not simply there to begin with, and the future is not what will unfold (Plotnikof & Mumby, 2024); both are continually reshaped through ongoing articulations (Nyberg et al., 2022). Hegemonic articulation operates across these coexisting temporalities: drawing on sedimented pasts to stabilize identities, responding to present dislocations that open political space, and projecting futures that unify demands into an aspirational horizon. Since society or the political field is never complete or sutured, it is through temporal distinctions (e.g. an invented past or imagined future) that new political subjects and equivalent chains can be articulated. Thus, by constructing a clear chronology between what is seen as a settled past and an evident future, time is depicted as a neutral order within which events unfold (Nyberg et al., 2020).

However, temporal instability or openness means that no social order is fully secured – there is always the potential for contestation and change. In discursive struggles, hegemonic strategies stitch together a fragmented social field into a coherent whole – in effect, to create a social imaginary or common horizon (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). With demands for radical change generally directed towards an alternative future (Parker & Parker, 2017), the maintenance of hegemony requires negating that future and/or providing a more compelling imaginary of a desired future with an equivalence grounded on the assumption that the actors’ demands will be met. Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles can thus be seen as a battle over different imaginaries of the future (Levy & Spicer, 2013). In the following section, we explore the importance of utopian politics in imaginaries of the future.

Social Imaginaries and the Politics of Utopia/Dystopia

In the previous section, we defined hegemony as the contingent social order of dominance and the ongoing struggle of connecting identities and demands. A social imaginary is how these disparate demands and identities are discursively unified into a sense of a coherent community (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This means that discourse is not just about language but refers to the articulated system of relationships between signs, symbols and meanings that construct the way reality is experienced and understood (Phillips et al., 2004). It is through discourse that objects, identities and social relations acquire meaning. Imaginaries are stitched together through political symbols or signifiers (like ‘Australia’ or ‘the people’) that create an imaginary unity. Laclau (2000, p. 55) argues that ‘the fullness of society’ is an ‘impossible object’; the collective unity can never be completely realized. Social imaginaries thus contingently impersonate what is seen as ‘society’ by filling this void – they provide the symbolic dimension of hegemony that groups can identify as a natural unity (Castoriadis, 1987). The creation of imaginaries can thus be seen as generating political representations that structure and give meaning to actions within society. Laclau (1990) sees the construction of a social imaginary as a discursive horizon – a necessary illusion of wholeness that grounds any hegemonic project.

This political aspect is well captured within organization studies, with scholars attending to social imaginaries as a source of contestation about the future (Augustine et al., 2019; Levy & Spicer, 2013; C. Wright et al., 2013). Actors and groups have the capacity to evoke images – or ‘imaginary significations’ – of things yet to come (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 146). For example, Levy and Spicer (2013) show the political struggle over climate change futures. They identified four different climate imaginaries (‘fossil fuel forever’, ‘climate apocalypse’, techno-market’ and ‘sustainable lifestyles’) that appeal to different interests and identities in the struggle for hegemony. In response to complex issues such as climate change, social imaginaries provide meaning and signification for society and also motivation for political action (Levy & Spicer, 2013; C. Wright et al., 2013).

While not all imaginaries are about ideal futures, or seen as utopian, they all have utopian elements since they are not fully developed or realized (Augustine et al., 2019; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). They provide symbolic resources for acting on and thinking about the future; there is an ‘absent fullness’ that each imaginary promises to fulfil (Laclau, 1996, p. 42). Social imaginaries encapsulate ideals based on fiction and fantasy (Augustine et al., 2019) and, as such, play into utopian/dystopian politics. They enable agency and construct visions that shape the possibility for alternative futures (Roux-Rosier et al., 2018). While the focus on social imaginaries in organization studies has shown the content of competing future imaginaries (e.g. Levy & Spicer, 2013; Roux-Rosier et al., 2018; C. Wright et al., 2013), less is known about the contestation between the futures portrayed (Augustine et al., 2019; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022) and how this favours one group over another.

Hegemonic politics is then the struggle to shape or tap into a social imaginary of the future that maintains or expands the hegemony – an idealized vision of the future, or utopia (Bloch, 1986; Mannheim, 1960). In the most basic sense, utopia is the expression, or impulse (Bloch, 1986), that drives a desire for a better way of being or living (Levitas, 1991). As such, utopia expresses possibility for a yet-to-be-realized place or society. Future imaginaries can then be employed for mobilizing action towards a vision of society which can include both radical utopian thinking of an alternative society, as well as conservative utopian ideas of returning to a ‘golden age’ of former glories.

In classical utopian studies, utopia is commonly understood as an imagined perfect society that does not and cannot exist (Levitas, 2013). By stating that utopias are impossible, the mammoth

task of their possible realization carries grave risk: the possibility of violence, terror, or totalitarianism – a dystopia (Levitas, 2013). In contrast, we are interested in how and why utopias are constructed and by whom. Utopias and the human desire for an improved future are mobilized by groups and actors in projects for social change and struggles for power (Mannheim, 1960). However, within the political process, the enactment of utopias is often represented as impossible, undesirable or even dangerous by opponents favouring the status quo (Marcuse, 1970). Utopia is then a political operation that discloses the limits of imagining futures (Jameson, 2004) and can be used by those in positions of power to defend and maintain hegemony.

In the temporal politics of the future, imaginaries can be mobilized that reject utopian alternatives and instead reaffirm the status quo. For Jameson (2023), the opposite of utopia is not dystopia but, rather, the status quo. This suggests that utopian discussions can be employed not only to imagine alternative futures (C. Wright et al., 2013), but also to impede or ridicule futures that challenge dominant modes of representation and meaning. Such utopian critique can be seen in the criminalization of activists associated with a range of social movements (Vegh Weis, 2022). For example, the future imaginaries of the environmental movement are often reformulated as dangerous to the current (prosperous) society, justifying state violence to enforce the very conditions that lead to catastrophic climate change (Dunlap & Brock, 2022). The same scenario can be framed differently for political purpose. As Levitas (1991, p. 1) notes, ‘Those utopians who seek to make their dreams come true are deemed to be hopelessly unrealistic, or worse, actively dangerous.’

Hegemonic projects use social imaginaries to present themselves as the best possible utopian realization, while criticizing and delegitimizing alternative imaginaries. Therefore, we suggest that the future-focused conceptualizations of utopia and dystopia are useful tools for thinking through how hegemony is upheld through different forms of utopian politics (e.g. utopian, dystopian, anti-utopian). The basic research question guiding this paper is: *How is utopian politics used to defend hegemony?*

Research Method

Context

As one of the world’s largest exporters of coal and gas and with among the highest per capita carbon emissions of developed economies, Australia’s economy is underpinned by the extraction and use of fossil fuels. However, over the last twenty years, climate change and fossil energy have become a source of increasingly heated political debate in Australia (Hudson, 2019). In particular, the experience of worsening extreme weather events such as the 2019/20 Black Summer fires (Celermajer et al., 2021) and mass coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef (Nyberg & Wright, 2024) have led to growing public concern over climate change and the emergence of social movements for climate action, including mass protests and calls for an end to new fossil fuel development (Colvin, 2020).

In line with the sector’s global political resistance to climate mitigation (C. Wright & Nyberg, 2021), fossil fuel companies have been central participants in this political controversy via public relations campaigns, lobbying, political donations and revolving door appointments between industry and the public sector, all aimed at limiting the regulation of carbon emissions and promoting coal mining, gas extraction and coal-fired power generation (Nyberg et al., 2013; Wilkinson, 2020). An important part of this process has been attempts to discredit not only climate scientists but also environmentalists and climate campaigners seeking to pressure governments to act on the issue. This has resulted in continued fossil fuel expansion and the growing criminalization of climate protest (Irwin et al., 2022).

Table 1. Interview participants.

Category	Total	Position	Total
Fossil fuel industry (coal, oil & gas)	16	Director/CEO	6
		Environment/climate change specialist	6
		Government relations & policy specialist	2
		Client/business development specialist	2
Energy generation and retail	8	Director/CEO	2
		Transitions specialist	2
		Business development specialist	2
		Government relations & policy specialist	2
Lobbyists and industry groups	9	Director/CEO (industry group)	2
		Senior advisor (industry group)	3
		Lobbyist	4
Politicians, advisors & staff	22	Politicians (state/local)	2
		Politicians (federal)	7
		Advisors / departmental staff (state/local)	5
		Advisors / department staff (federal)	8
Trade unions	2	Union officials	2
Total			57

Data collection

This paper forms part of a larger study exploring the political economy of low carbon transition in Australia, involving an extensive range of interview and document data. An emergent theme in the project has been how the fossil fuel industry and its political allies have sought to represent their political opponents, specifically climate activists and environment groups. Our main source of data for this paper involved interviews with 57 representatives from major fossil fuel corporations, relevant industry associations, lobbyists and advisors, federal and state politicians (including two former Prime Ministers and a former state Premier), as well as government bureaucrats focused on energy and climate change policy (see Table 1). These semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors between 2018 and 2022 and lasted on average for about one hour. Interviewees were asked about how industries and governments had responded to the challenge of lowering emissions, as well as their engagement with the media, government and public in relation to climate policy. The interview recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service and then imported into the qualitative data analysis software program, QSR NVivo, for coding.

In addition to the interviews, we also undertook a review of Australian media sources, parliamentary speeches, and public addresses by politicians and business leaders for commentary on climate activism. This search utilized keywords in the media database Factiva, the parliamentary Hansard and specific industry association websites for the words ‘activist’, ‘climate protest’ and ‘climate change’. The search was date-limited beginning in August 2018, with the emergence of the School Climate Strike movement (SS4C, 2022), and ending in December 2022, following the jailing of a climate activist for obstructing traffic on the Sydney Harbour Bridge (Visontay, 2022). The search resulted in 481 documents (see Table 2) which were included in our qualitative data analysis.

Table 2. Media and document sources.

Source	Description	# docs
Queensland Resources Council, Business Council of Australia, APPEA, Minerals Council of Australia	Industry association media releases	29
Parliament of Australia	Ministerial press releases and speeches	57
<i>Hansard</i>	Record of the proceedings of Australian Parliament and its committees	133
<i>The Australian</i>	Daily nationally distributed newspaper; owned by News Corp	44
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	Daily local newspaper owned by Nine Entertainment Co.	39
ABC News	National public broadcaster with online news website	89
<i>The Guardian Australia</i>	Online news website; owned by Guardian Media Group	48
<i>Sky News Australia</i> videos	Television news; owned by News Corp	42
Total		481

Data analysis

In analysing our data we undertook a multi-stage process of reflexive thematic coding using the QSR NVivo software package (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the first stage of analysis, one of the authors undertook an initial process of ‘open coding’ segments of text reflecting similar wording or activities into first-order codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This resulted in 277 codes which were then developed into categories representing different actors (e.g. companies, industry associations, activists, politicians, business leaders), discourses (e.g. transition, economy, denial, national interest, competitiveness) and activities (e.g. advocacy, alliances, protests).

In the second stage of analysis, we developed this initial coding with an abductive approach that moved between coding and theory (Gioia et al., 2013; Van Maanen et al., 2007). Specifically, an emergent theme in our data was the way in which fossil fuel representatives and their political allies characterized the growth of climate activism during the time period of our analysis (2018–2022). This led us to engage with the conceptual framework of hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) as a way of understanding the defence of fossil fuel expansion and the creation of a political frontier linked to future imaginaries (Augustine et al., 2019). For instance, interviewees often made claims about climate activists and their naivety, while also acknowledging the need for the energy transition and supporting scenarios that fell short of the urgency required by the scientific evidence. They also presented narratives of the future regarding the role of fossil fuels, their industry and the viability of their opponents’ proposals. Here we identified the key discourses in the combined data as 16 higher-level codes (see Table 3).

Based on discussions within the research team, we then developed a third stage of data analysis in which two of the authors undertook a process of axial coding (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), exploring the core imaginaries that industry and political leaders used to criticize environmental activists while championing their own role and activities. As outlined in Table 3, we identified four key imaginaries (see also Appendix for further examples of coding). The first of these we termed a *green utopian fantasy*, in which industry and politicians characterized environmentalists as naive idealists whose demands to end fossil fuels were seen as unrealistic and

Table 3. Qualitative data coding framework.

Imaginary	Key discourses (codes)	Definition
(1) Green utopian fantasy	Uninformed	Climate protesters seen as ignorant and uninformed of economic and energy needs
	An impossible dream	Climate activists viewed as unrealistic regarding energy transition
	Emotional idealists	Climate campaigners seen as emotional and lacking rational judgement
	Children's fantasy	Focus on young people in climate protests and claims of naivety
(2) Dark dystopian future	Disruptive protest	Climate protests are disruptive to the public, dangerous and unlawful
	Anti-progress	Protests against fossil fuels endanger living standards and are economically harmful
	Promoting inequality	Climate campaigners promote an agenda of social inequality - costs of transition will be shared unequally
	Corrupting influence	Leaders of climate protests are manipulative and corrupt the young
(3) Utopian technofix	Profit and innovation	Core motivators of business which lead to solutions
	New technologies	Industry presents itself providing technological solutions to climate change
	Carbon capture & storage	Industry promotion of CCS as a way of reducing emissions and continuing fossil fuel use
	Gas as a transition fuel	Discourse of methane as a transition fuel to a lower-carbon future
(4) Status quo	Business as usual	Demand for fossil fuels is strong and business will continue to grow
	Wealth generator	Fossil fuel companies are generators of economic wealth and social well-being
	Sensible centre	The industry depicts itself as the sensible centre in climate and energy debates
	Pragmatism	Any move away from fossil energy needs to be realistic and pragmatic
	Responsible citizen	Fossil fuel corporations present themselves as socially responsible

fanciful. By contrast, a second imaginary in the fossil fuel discourse constructed the environmental agenda in a very different vein; as dangerous, manipulative and promoting what we have termed a *dark dystopia* of energy poverty. However, industry representatives countered this with their own preferred articulations of the future which presented more positive and less threatening visions. For instance, a third imaginary was what we termed the *utopian technofix* which emphasized the benefits of the industry's innovative capabilities and the role of new technologies in alleviating climate concerns while maintaining fossil fuel use. At the same time, industry leaders also proffered a fourth imaginary which we have labelled the continuity of the *status quo*, in which the continued demand for fossil fuels was presented as inevitable.

The fourth and final stage of our analysis involved a further interpretative step (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to identify what these imaginaries sought to achieve politically. Here we identified four discursive strategies through which the fossil fuel industry and its political allies sought to maintain and reinforce its dominance: (i) *establishing a political frontier* between itself and its opponents; (ii) *differentiating opponents* and identifying divisions within them; (iii) *building equivalence* between elements of their opponents' agenda and their own; and (iv) *constructing a path between the past and the future*. In the sections that follow we detail these four strategies and the way in which these utilized utopian and dystopian imaginaries.

Establishing a political frontier

In responding to the growing wave of climate activism and protests that emerged in Australia during the period 2018–2022, the fossil fuel industry and its political allies sought to create a clear political frontier against its critics. Here, two key messages were evident in the industry discourse. First, the depiction of advocacy for renewable energy as a utopian fantasy based upon an immature understanding of energy production and economics. Second, that the outcome of their critics' agenda would involve a dystopian future of energy poverty which threatened the Australian way of life. Thus, in distinguishing a clear political divide between themselves and their opponents, the fossil fuel industry constructed activists' diverse demands around two imaginaries – green utopian fantasy and dark dystopian future – that they then used to critique them.

The first aspect of this differentiation between the industry and its critics focused on how environmental calls for a transition away from fossil energy were *uninformed* and lacked an understanding of the complexities and realities of climate and energy issues. For example, a senior lobbyist for a multinational coal mining company characterized climate activists as largely ignorant of the industry and its activities, 'when you drill down into activist views they're anti-coal. . . but they couldn't tell you anything about it' (I44). This critique was echoed in the statements of sympathetic politicians and regional business leaders. For instance, the head of the chamber of commerce from a regional coal mining district argued:

When you look at the campaign to stop coal-fired power stations and to stop coal mining, there's no discussion about what replaces it. The things that are talked about to replace it theoretically, renewable energy, smart manufacturing, tourism, education, you know, all that stuff, doesn't add up. (I25)

Claims that environmental critiques of the industry were uninformed coalesced into the suggestion that proposals for alternatives to fossil fuels were an *impossible dream*, out of touch with technological and economic realities. For instance, the CEO of one electricity retailer exclaimed 'it's naive to think that you can turn coal off tomorrow' (I3). Another senior manager in a major energy company declared 'you can't have 100 per cent renewables unless you've got vast amounts of storage, so that at nighttime or when the wind's not blowing, you still have enough power in reserve to keep the system going' (I5). Here, interviewees criticized the claims of climate activists that electricity production, let alone broader aspects of the economy such as transport and industrial processes, were ready for a transition to renewable energy. Respondents presented the idea of a transition to a renewable economy as a fanciful utopia. Renewable energy was described as 'just not ready', if a transition were even possible at all.

This industry critique of an unrealistic green utopia carried over into assertions that their environmental opponents were driven by *emotional* rather than rational motivations. As a senior manager in one of the country's major gas companies stated:

There's a perceived hysteria about what's going on in terms of rising sea levels and the fact it's the drought, or we have another hot day and people say 'This is climate change!' This undermines the long-term scientific evidence about what's actually going on. (I19)

Conservative politicians aligned with the industry echoed these views, arguing that young climate protesters advocating for a clean energy future were not only ignorant of the realities of energy production but overly emotional. As one politician argued, any move away from fossil energy represented an unrealistic and emotional fantasy:

We are being driven by emotive arguments that don't examine practical outcomes. We have terrified young people into a religious activism of sorts. Many of these kids have no concept of how electricity is produced, what baseload power is and why it's necessary. We've substituted logic for emotion, action for symbolism. (Commonwealth of Australia, August 2, 2022, pp. 520–521)

While the critique of renewable energy as utopian formed part of the fossil fuel industry's creation of a political frontier with its critics, this also involved a parallel discourse that acting upon these calls would result in a dystopian future. Here, environmentalists' proposals for the closure of coal-fired power stations were argued to result in a future of energy blackouts, economic recession and a return to less developed and secure existence. As one conservative politician argued in the federal parliament:

This is the crazy way that people think. We in Australia put our costs up, shut our mines down, put people on the dole. . . Be realistic. Shut industries down and move them overseas, and those same industries that do the same job overseas will actually produce more CO₂ on the planet. (Commonwealth of Australia, December 4, 2018, p. 9364)

Climate activists were thus represented as a danger to society, their demands for decarbonization lacking both common sense and concern for consumers, and their agenda for social change having the potential to plunge the community into a dystopian future of darkness and despair. As the director of one major coal company argued:

If people want to still have affordable electricity, it's going to take much longer than anybody thinks. . . I think, because if everyone's told, 'Well, you're going to have to use your car less or catch the bus and not your car', I don't think Australians really like that! (I4)

This industry critique of environmentalists promoting a future dystopia extended to claims that any low carbon transition would *promote greater inequality*. As the leader of the nation's coal-mining union argued:

It's about equity between regions so that the cost doesn't all fall on clusters of regional communities, so they don't have high suicide rates; because you could close the coal industry tomorrow and put aside the fact the lights will go out, but say you did what the Greens wanted, life wouldn't change in the cities! (I30)

This claim that environmentalists promoted inequality extended to arguments that coal exported from Australia was helping bring people in developing economies out of energy poverty: 'subsistence agriculture is a peasant existence, and the Indian government wants to bring power to them all to get progress going. You've got people in Australia who want to shut down one of the sources of that coal' (I1). This moral claim around inequality, then, created an amoral other within the constructed political frontier.

Thus, the fossil fuel industry and its political allies presented climate and environmental activists as both dangerous ('the lights will go out') and selfish (supporting actions which impacted regional communities rather than cities and the more affluent). The political frontier between the industry and its opponents was articulated through the reformulation of environmentalists' future scenarios as both an impossible green utopia and an undesirable dark dystopia.

Differentiating opponents

While industry discourses sought to create a clear political divide between the industry's imaginaries of the future and that of its environmental critics, the characterization of a green utopian fantasy and a dark dystopian future also suggested divisions within its political opponents. Here, industry and political leaders stressed the divergence between young, naive climate protesters and older, manipulative radicals seeking to overthrow the economic order. For instance, in response to the worldwide phenomenon of youth-led School Strikes for Climate, industry supporters presented the protesters as naive and idealistic engaged in a *children's fantasy* of a possible future green utopia. Responding to one of the large climate rallies across the nation's capital cities, then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was quick to claim that young people were not sufficiently knowledgeable to be engaging with such issues:

Each day I send my kids to school and I know other members' kids should also go to school but we do not support our schools being turned into parliaments. . . What we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools. (AAP, 2018)

For Morrison, young people's political agency was something to be guarded against; arguing that as students were still in the process of 'learning', they were not fit to participate in public debate. In not 'knowing' enough, being too young and choosing protest over sitting in a classroom, their concerns were seen as illegitimate. As one member of parliament stated, 'I think – some of it's a bit indulgent. . . there seems to be a lot of middle-class, inner-city kids leading it. . . their solutions aren't practical' (I13). In this way, young people involved in the climate strikes could be acknowledged as having a generational concern for their future, yet at the same time their demands and solutions could be dismissed as impractical, utopian and impossible. Their future imaginary was constructed and criticized for being utopian.

Yet, while political and industry leaders stressed the naivete and youth of climate protesters, a contrasting discourse presented others in the climate movement as dangerous and manipulative, driven by malevolent intentions and whose actions threatened the Australian way of life. Here, calls for the end of fossil energy were argued to hide more dangerous and revolutionary agendas which were a *corrupting influence*, particularly on younger people. For instance, as the director of one corporate advisory firm argued:

Where I really, really worry is that it is inevitable that some probably younger person is going to go onto a mine site, a port site, a rail line and will get themselves killed. They're just the cannon fodder of older, politically motivated, radical people. . . Even though they say it's organic and there is no hierarchy [they are] old time Marxist Trots . . . who are seeing their ability to bring around the revolution via other means. Then manipulating young people. Have you noticed it's always the young people who get arrested? (I44)

While young climate activists were depicted as inherently naive, other, older activists were demonized as Svengalis, corrupting their younger cohorts. The further evocation of 'old time Marxist Trots' seeking to 'bring around the revolution' hinted at the potential dystopia that would

result from the success of these protests; where the desire to respond to climate change became a threat to the existing economic order.

A key discourse here was the focus on *disruptive protest*. As part of the growing public frustration over the lack of climate action, new groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Blockade Australia undertook protests disrupting industrial activities and public spaces. These activities led to increasingly volatile statements from political leaders and a growing criminalization of protest activity. In a speech to a prominent fossil fuel industry group, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison argued that a threat to the future of mining was coming from a ‘new breed of radical activism’, describing protesters as ‘anarchists’ seeking to ‘deny the liberties of Australians’ (Karp, 2019). This was echoed by industry respondents who described activists as irritants, engaging in dangerous ‘stunts’. As one resource industry lobbyist commented:

The activists started going too far, overreaching where they started to look like zealots and unreasonable and irrational. That started getting people’s anger up. That actually then started to spill over into ‘well these bloody unemployed, professional activists telling me that I’m not allowed to mine coal when it’s legal and what they’re doing is illegal’. (I44)

Specifically, by emphasizing the boundaries of the law, this discourse pointed to the dangers of a dystopian, lawless future. As the New South Wales Premier declared after the jailing of one climate activist, ‘If protesters want to put our way of life at risk, then they should have the book thrown at them and that’s pleasing to see’ (Rose & McGowan, 2022).

Thus, in distinguishing between environmental protesters as either naive children seeking a green utopia, or older radicals seeking to overthrow the social order, the industry and its political allies sought to highlight divisions within the climate movement. The industry’s characterization of future green utopian and dark dystopian imaginaries served not only to distinguish the political frontier but also sought to fragment its political opponents.

Building equivalence

Beyond critiquing climate activists, the fossil fuel industry also promoted more positive imaginaries of futures in which industry itself dealt with the climate threat. Here industry discourses constructed their own future utopian imaginary (what we have termed a ‘utopian technofix’) in which business would lead a lower-carbon future through processes of corporate innovation and new technologies. Through this imaginary, industry respondents sought to incorporate and build equivalence with the climate concerns of their critics within a conservative utopian future in which business innovation and entrepreneurialism would provide the solutions to the climate crisis. This is a temporal discursive strategy in that the protesters’ demands will be met in the future – just not yet.

A key part of these positive industry discourses centred around how the industry was developing new technologies which it claimed would help in moving towards a lower emissions future. This framing suggested that while there were challenges in responding to climate change, the core values of business – the desire for *profit* and the willingness to *innovate* – would be sufficient. As the senior environment manager in one of the world’s largest mining companies argued, ‘I think within the resources industry, we’re certainly moving. . . There are some companies that are really innovating and looking to make a real profit out of this whole thing and so it’s a natural pull for them’ (I38). Rather than full-throated rejection of renewable energy, the industry discourse promoted the idea of fossil energy as assisting in the transition to a lower-emissions economy. As the CEO of the peak mining industry association argued:

If you talk about the resources sector you'll find the companies do accept the science. They do accept the Paris Agreement. They do accept the goal of moving to a low emissions future. They do accept the challenge to move to lower emissions and renewable energy. (Commonwealth of Australia, June 25, 2021c, p. 23)

Key in holding this imaginary together was a strong emphasis on the utopian possibilities of *new technologies*, with industry leaders promoting the idea that it was possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without the need for radical economic or social change. For example, as the head of the coal industry association argued, 'the solutions to climate change are technological solutions more than anything else' (I21). This imaginary portrayed a conservative utopia, with a slow or delayed transition to ensure that the current social order remained in place.

For instance, one of the future technologies the coal industry had promoted for many years was the development of *carbon capture and storage* (CCS) as the best way to reduce emissions while allowing for a continuation of coal mining and coal-fired electricity generation (Marshall, 2016). Despite the failure to develop economically viable CCS facilities, industry advocates continued to talk up the potential of the technology. As a senior advisor in the country's peak resource body argued:

We do need to start actually incentivizing the deployment and development of this technology [CCS] so that we're not just preoccupied by the silver bullet that's perceived to be renewables but actually looking at the full suite of how we produce emissions and what we can do to get to net-zero emissions. (I14)

The overarching message being that the issue of net-zero emissions was accepted as a future challenge and already being addressed by industry through the development of future technologies. This also left space for the industry and political allies to assert that, in the current period, the expansion of fossil energy must continue to maintain economic and social well-being and facilitate a future zero-emissions world.

Aligned to this conservative future utopia was the promotion of methane gas as a *transition fuel*. Methane, while itself a powerful greenhouse gas, was presented by industry representatives as a 'solution' to concerns over rising carbon emissions given claims that it was a 'cleaner' energy source than coal and could assist the move towards future decarbonization. As one of the world's largest exporters of liquified natural gas, the rapid expansion of gas extraction in Australia was justified by the industry as 'the best thing we can do to reduce global emissions by displacing coal and dirty fuels in Asia' (Santos, 2019, p. 5).

Domestically, gas was promoted by the industry as a significant contributor to electricity production as older coal-fired power stations closed and renewable energy expanded. Here, gas-fired power was viewed as an important stopgap to the claimed intermittency of solar and wind energy, 'So if you use gas to run a generator you provide a quality of power that has two things. It stabilizes the grid so it complements the renewables, and secondly, it's on demand' (I5).

Thus, in these industry depictions of a future conservative utopia, the technologies put forward were those which complemented renewable energy. Affordable and reliable fossil fuels were presented as part of the transition to a greener future. Such a pathway provided an opportunity for the sector to incorporate elements of their opponents' climate concerns within a positive future vision of technology and business innovation, while maintaining the potential for fossil fuels to continue into the future. Industry spokespeople presented a 'win-win' scenario in which little – if anything – needed to be sacrificed in response to climate change. This equivalence between the conservative utopia and the green utopia was differentiated from the dark dystopian elements of the industry's characterization of their critics.

Constructing a path from the past to the future

The final constructed imaginary evident in our data involved discourses depicting a future that looked like the present (and the past). This created a tension between the two imaginaries promoted by the industry: the utopian technofix outlined in the previous section and a business-as-usual agenda we have termed ‘status quo’. In overcoming this tension, the industry stressed the equivalence between their conservative utopian future (utopian technofix) and the status quo of the present. Three discursive themes dominated here in constructing a linear path from the past to the future: that demand for fossil fuels would continue into the future; that the industry represented the ‘sensible centre’ of energy debate; and that the industry was made up of responsible corporate citizens creating wealth for the nation.

Despite the recognition of the urgent need for carbon emissions reduction evident in international climate agreements and the global uptake of renewable energy technologies, the Australian fossil fuel industry maintained a *business-as-usual* discourse that the future for coal and gas remained strong. Industry representatives stressed growing energy demand in Asian markets, which they argued could not be replaced by renewable energy. As a representative from a resource industry association outlined in a Senate presentation:

Where we are seeing strong demand is in the Asian region and the ASEAN countries, some of whom are producers themselves. That demand that is there means we are going to see coal in the mix for some time. . . Australia has high-quality coal compared to many other countries around the world. (Commonwealth of Australia, June 25, 2021b, p. 42)

This projection of the continued need for fossil fuels into the future was linked by the industry to future emissions reduction targets. As the CEO of one of the country’s largest coal companies outlined:

I think that net zero emissions 2050 are exactly that – net zero emissions. That doesn’t mean no emissions from coal. The net zero emissions target does allow for coal to continue in the future – that’s an aspiration. (Commonwealth of Australia, June 25, 2021a, p. 4)

The future role of the fossil fuel industry was also linked in discourse promoting its economic value as a *wealth generator*. As the same CEO declared:

Australia’s \$68 billion export coal industry has a widespread positive impact, and we’re not just talking about an economic data point. We are talking about people, families and businesses all thriving and secure as a result of our work. Our industry’s prospects are inextricably linked to their futures. Our success is their success. (Commonwealth of Australia, June 25, 2021a, p. 1)

By evoking the wealth of not only the nation, but suggesting that the benefits ‘trickled down’ (‘not just. . . an economic data point’), the implication was that any departure from this path would have a negative effect on national well-being; thus the industry’s continued growth was depicted as aligned with the needs of not only current, but future, citizens.

Following on from this, the argument then extended into the positioning of industry representatives as a *sensible centre* in the debate over how the nation should respond to climate change. This was articulated in contrast to the depiction of environmentalists as naive and/or threatening. As the external relations manager at one of the country’s major energy companies outlined:

We've lost the sensible centre, for want of a better term, in terms of saying we need to adopt those long-term solutions [to climate change] now, without overplaying it in terms of what's actually required. (I19)

According to industry representatives, the sensible centre implied much slower and more measured shifts towards a lower-carbon economy that would avoid the more dystopian future they saw resulting from a wholesale shift away from fossil fuels. Fossil fuels were needed to address climate change and get to a green future imaginary. Here, respondents stressed the need for greater *pragmatism* rather than a wholesale commitment to competing with renewable energy technologies. As one senior manager argued:

You need to, I think, have a bit of pragmatism in the fact that certainly for the short to medium term and who knows after that, there will be an element of the energy mix that is driven by coal. I think the sensible discussion there is, how do we burn it better, use it better, in regard to making it less emissions intensive. (I29)

Finally, the industry imaginary of status quo and limited change was also underpinned by discourses which stressed fossil fuel corporations as *responsible citizens*. This presentation of broader social responsibility extended to various past 'sustainability' initiatives in areas such as employee health and safety, Indigenous employment programmes, mine reclamation and sustainability reporting. For instance, the sustainability manager of one of the country's largest coal companies stressed the significant emphasis their company placed on environmental stewardship and corporate responsibility, albeit noting that economic gains were at the centre of their activities:

I think we are very responsible when it comes to actually being good corporate citizens in a whole range of areas, but at the end of the day we have shareholders. We know we've got to have a social licence to operate, but we also need to be profitable. (I9)

Thus, while environmentalists argued that the inherent link between coal and climate change was a key element of critique, the industry focus on being seen as a 'good corporate citizen' acted as a surrogate for its broader environmental impact.

Having suggested the nation's economic dependence on fossil fuels was set to continue regardless, and that these benefits would be shared among the populace by responsible, sustainable, corporate citizens, the creation of the political frontier aligned industry with 'ordinary', 'everyday' citizens who shunned the extremes of political debates and were looking for a 'sensible' middle ground. Within this discourse, the industry was able to move forward without responding to the central concern of climate campaigners: the industry's role in ever escalating carbon emissions. The industry's imagined future of a less carbon-intensive economy based upon new technologies and innovation then moved seamlessly into an incremental adaptation of present business practice, thus establishing a clear path between present and future. The utopian technofix imaginary was reached through depicting a slow development and sensible investment in expanding the fossil fuel sector to eventually fund the technological innovations necessary.

Discussion

Across the globe, escalating extreme weather events and increasingly alarming scientific projections have sparked the rise of a global climate movement, challenging the entrenched dominance of the fossil fuel industry (C. Wright et al., 2022). In response, the fossil fuel industry has sought to defend its dominance by creating and critiquing social imaginaries that give meaning to actions within society (Levy & Spicer, 2013; Wittneben et al., 2012; C. Wright et al., 2013). These

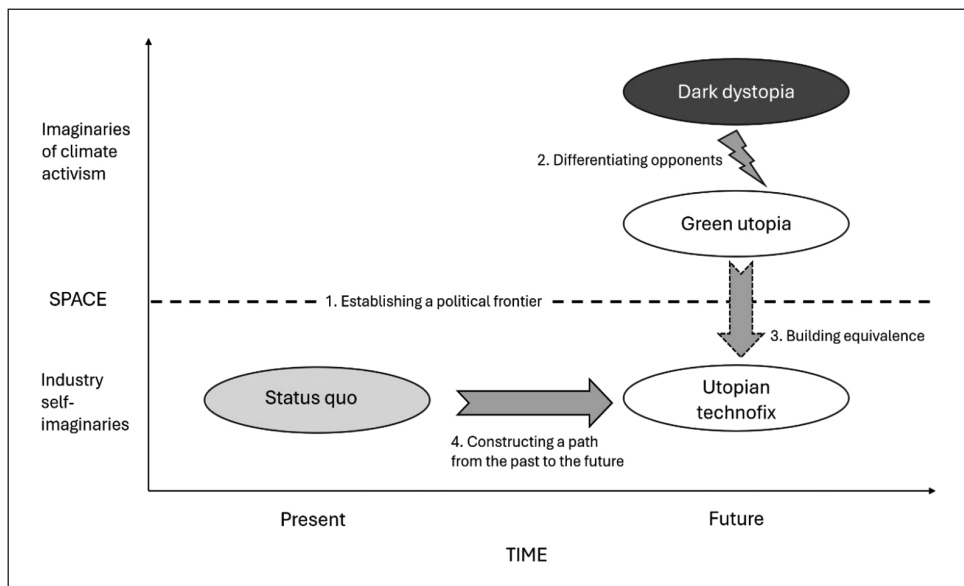


Figure 1. Fossil fuel industry imaginaries and discursive strategies.

imaginaries can never be fully realized; there is a necessary openness towards the future. As such, all social imaginaries have a utopian element or potential in the contestation over how the future will differ from the present – what the future should or could look like. In understanding how the fossil fuel industry is employing imaginaries within the politics of the future, we asked the question: *How is utopian politics used to defend hegemony?*

Empirically, we have answered this through an analysis of the statements of fossil fuel executives, industry associations, politicians and aligned advisors regarding the growing public concern about climate change and widespread climate protest. As set out in Figure 1, our analysis demonstrates how the industry constructs activists' future imaginaries as both utopian and impossible, and also dystopian and undesirable, to maintain its hegemony. In contrast, the industry's conception of the future is constructed as the present status quo or a future based on technofixes. This utopian politics divides the social space between, on the one hand, industry imaginaries connecting present and future demands and, on other hand, imaginaries assigned to its opponents. The temporal politics closes off the opponents' utopian thinking and supports a fossil-fuelled path from the past, in the present and into the future.

Our analysis reveals four discursive strategies of utopian politics mobilizing support for the fossil fuel industry. First, by developing a political frontier, the industry creates a political division between its own 'realistic' and 'sensible' actions and those of their opponents which are presented as naive or even dangerous. The political frontier divides the spatial field of political contestation (see strategy 1 in Figure 1). The imaginaries of climate activism are portrayed as distant (and potentially dangerous) futures, while the industry's own imaginaries are positive visions of the present and a technofix future. The former, status quo imaginary, is anti-utopian in that it closes alternative futures to the current hegemony as impossible and doomed to fail (Jameson, 2005) (see Table 4). This imaginary of the present as the future serves as a critique of activists' utopian ideals. The latter imaginary, utopian technofix, is a conservative 'counter-utopia' (Mannheim, 1960) that emulates activists' utopian thinking and justifies the continuation of the existing system supported

Table 4. Fossil fuel discursive strategies and their political implications.

Constructed imaginary	Type of utopia	Political function of utopian element	Political implication	Discursive strategies
Green utopia	Impossible utopia	An imagined society portrayed as a naive and impossible project	Reformulation and critique of activists' imaginaries	Equivalence created for political frontier (1) (us vs. them) and differentiation for fragmentation (2) (them vs. them)
Dark dystopia	Undesirable dystopia	An imagined society marked with profoundly undesirable conditions		
Utopian technofix	Conservative utopia	An imaginary society that preserves or restores a past or present social order	Promotion of industry's imaginary	Equivalence for temporal linearity between the industry's imaginaries (4), and equivalence with activists' imaginary (3)
Status quo	Anti-utopia	An imaginary society that acts as a critique of the desirability of utopian projects		

by innovation and technology. The industry's two imaginaries are mobilized to alleviate concerns about climate change and the need to reduce fossil fuel consumption. There is thus a clear division in the mobilization of futures in maintaining the hegemony.

Second, by constructing two different imaginaries of climate activism – one utopian and one dystopian – the industry fragments the movement for climate action (see strategy 2 in Figure 1): one that is well-meaning but naive (utopia), and one that is dangerous and seeking to destroy the economy (dystopia) (see Table 4). By doing this, the industry does not need to demonize all the opposition, especially children who are presented as innocent and naive. However, the 'naive child' is differentiated from the more radical activists and presented as 'the cannon fodder' of 'older, politically motivated' climate activists. In this way, utopian politics seeks to separate and break commonly connected demands and identities, and any potential equivalence among opponents demanding an alternative future is fragmented.

Third, the fossil fuel industry constructs a partial equivalence between its own social imaginary of the future – a conservative technofix utopia – and the green utopia articulated for the activists (see strategy 3 in Figure 1). The industry reformulates elements of the green utopia (i.e. replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy) and incorporates concerns about climate change, thus suggesting it can lead the way to a net-zero future. The demands from activists in addressing climate change can be met by the industry's utopian imaginary of technofix. This strategy employs a conservative counter-utopia that preserves or restores their dominant position in the social order and protects this position from the critique evident in activists' future imaginaries (Mannheim, 1960) (see Table 4).

Finally, the two industry imaginaries – status quo and utopian technofix – are connected in constructing equivalence between those sceptical about addressing climate change or the urgency of addressing climate change (status quo), and those supporting acting on climate change (technofix) (see strategy 4 in Figure 1). Like any dominant system or order, the fossil fuel hegemony contains contradictory elements of both anti-utopia (status quo) and utopia (technofix) (Levitas, 2013) (see Table 4). This hegemonic strategy negates these contradictory elements by creating a path that builds upon the past, supports the dominant social order in the present, and directs actions towards a future that almost looks the same, just a bit greener and more technologically advanced. Temporality acts as a bridge between the status quo and a technofix future. The two industry

imaginaries, together, thus expand the hegemonic project by providing a linear trajectory from the past to the future.

With this, we suggest that industry and political leaders promote a hegemonic assumption that there can be no other imagined future but a continuation of the current political economy. While conservative forces are typically anti-utopian in their defence of the status quo, the conservative ‘counter-utopia’ is itself utopian insofar as it relies on wishful faith in technological progress and the claim that no radical transformations are needed to address climate change. The ‘sensible’ centre’s decades of neoliberal policies have narrowed the scope of social possibilities (Jameson, 2005). From this political position, there is no alternative to capitalism and any alternative is seen as naive and dangerous. Indeed, walking this tightrope between anti-utopia and counter-utopia has been proselytized by ecomodernist writers who suggest that the continuation of globalized economic development provides the best response to climate disruption (Nordhaus & Shellenberger, 2007). As business thought-leaders such as Bill Gates have suggested, rather than any radical system-level change, capitalist innovation and entrepreneurial vision can be relied upon to solve climate change and all can look forward to a ‘good Anthropocene’ (Dalby, 2016; Gates, 2021).

Contributions

Our paper’s first contribution advances the discussion of constructing future imaginaries as a political act. Previous research on imaginaries in organization studies has highlighted utopian thinking for creating imaginaries of the future (Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Shanahan, 2025). The emphasis in the literature has been on the form of the imaginaries (Augustine et al., 2019; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022) and the collective consensus (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Pettit et al., 2023; N. A. Thompson & Byrne, 2022) required for producing and enacting desired futures (Wenzel et al., 2020).

We contribute to this literature by explaining the utopian politics underlying imaginaries of the future (Beckert, 2021) and future making (Wenzel et al., 2020). A prominent inspiration is Erik Olin Wright’s (2010) ‘real utopias’ of existing and viable alternatives to the prevailing social order (see e.g. Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Shanahan, 2025). Real utopias are counter-hegemonic in that they act against dominant hegemonies for social transformation. In contrast, we explain how the dominant social order employs utopian politics to maintain the status quo. That is, to ensure that the future looks like the present.

This is not simply the classical conservative anti-utopian politics of proclaiming that there are no alternatives (Jameson, 2005). With escalating climate impacts, the competitive price of renewable energy and environmental movements demanding change, the fossil fuel hegemony has developed a conservative ‘counter-utopian’ imaginary that addresses these concerns. For the dominant social order, utopian politics requires the continuous interplay between (i) anti-utopianism proclaiming that there are no alternatives, and (ii) counter-utopianism of a future that looks similar to the present. This interplay creates a linear path from the past to the future (Feuls et al., 2024; Nyberg et al., 2020), incorporates key elements of competing alternative and reformulated imaginaries (Costas & Grey, 2014), and undermines challenges to the dominant social order.

Our second contribution is to the discussion of hegemony in organization studies (Dey et al., 2016; Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; van Bommel & Spicer, 2011). This literature has shown the importance of manufacturing meaning in developing a chain of equivalence that holds the hegemony together. The emphasis has been on the spatial dimension of how signifiers as units of meaning (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021) or social imaginaries (Levy & Spicer, 2013) stabilize the contingent field into a social order. The content of the signifiers or imaginaries work by connecting demands. However, the temporal dimension of those demands is rarely articulated.

We extend the current emphasis on securing consent through the politics of equivalence and difference by explaining the temporal elements of closing and enacting possible futures in hegemonic politics. Framing an opponent's future imaginaries as unachievable utopian fantasies and/or dangerous and harmful dystopias forms an important part of the discursive process through which hegemony is defended and maintained. It rules out what might be possible from further discussion and constructs one's opponents as people who cannot be taken seriously in debating critical social and economic issues. In contrast, the industry presents itself as economically responsible and enacting a path towards a good society – a conservative technofix utopia. The continuation of the present is thus necessary for a desirable future.

This advances neo-Gramscian discussions of hegemony by showing the mobilizing potential of social imaginaries. Without a temporal dimension, signifiers or imaginaries lack transformational direction. Our paper shows how utopian politics is about linking up future imaginaries with present demands or, alternatively, dissociating interests and identities with competing imaginaries. The former is achieved by providing a blueprint for how the future is attainable; hegemony is upheld by creating a future imaginary that accommodates critique by incorporating their demands in the future, not just yet. The creation of a future imaginary then addresses demands both by those that are sceptical about urgent changes and those that call for it. The latter, differentiation, is realized by ridiculing or demonizing political opponents or by arguing that the competing future is not attainable or is undesirable. The politics of the future is, in this case, about undermining any paths toward an alternative future. Hegemony is then held together not only by demands, but by those demands that are imaginable – possible and attainable futures.

This brings us to our third contribution in seeking to understand humanity's failure to avert a worsening climate crisis. Existing literature has focused on the ways in which the high-carbon sectors of the global economy have resisted regulatory moves to reduce carbon emissions (Brulle, 2018; MacKay & Munro, 2012; C. Wright et al., 2022). However, less attention has been paid to how the fossil fuel hegemony has responded to the new breed of climate activism that challenges the moral worthiness of fossil fuels. In recent years, the physical realities of climate disruption have become a growing feature of public consciousness, raising the stakes in maintaining a future imaginary of continued human betterment and progress.

In this new uncertain climate age, the project of maintaining a political frontier defending business as usual becomes more difficult. It is perhaps no surprise then, that the discursive and regulatory response to climate protests have become markedly repressive. Across the world, climate activists face increasingly authoritarian responses from governments supportive of the continued expansion of fossil energy. Indeed, while the industry has constructed a dystopian imaginary from activists' imaginaries, there is another dystopia supported by the fossil fuel industry that is haunting current climate politics: coercive state intervention and authoritarian rule. The industry's chain of equivalence is becoming more and more dependent on a demonized Other and a polarization between those who favour the dominant social order and those who dare oppose it. And yet, this development may actually reveal the limits of the current political imaginary, in that the reliance upon coercive state power may well indicate that hegemonic regimes are losing the political consensus – which is to say they are 'no longer "leading" but only "dominant"' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 275–276).

It is therefore important to support utopia as a method for critical intervention. While our study was limited to interviewees mainly from within the fossil fuel hegemony, the political function of their imaginaries can still provide insight for counter-hegemonic politics. In complementing the 'real utopias' (E. O. Wright, 2010) discussed in the field of organization studies (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Shanahan, 2025), we turn to Jameson's (2005) 'anti-anti-utopianism'. In contrast to Wright's concrete models of alternatives, Jameson suggests using utopian politics to challenge

the capitalist hegemony. The aim of anti-anti-utopianism is not to provide alternative ‘real’ and existing utopias (see E. O. Wright, 2010), but to reopen the political imagination, which capitalism constantly constrains.

This involves providing the ‘real utopias’ with utopian direction by highlighting the limits of the present. Real utopias are complemented with the imaginative function of utopia against those who dismiss it as impossible, naive or dangerous. Anti-anti utopia is here a method of stretching the limitations of dominant imaginaries in demanding what is seen as impossible. With protest movements reclaiming the future with slogans such as ‘another world is possible’, they invoke the idea of an alternative future. This type of anti-anti-utopianism rejects the cynicism of political leaders and critiques the anti-utopian stance of what is seen as ‘realism’ by dismissing alternatives. While the fossil fuel industry attempts to discredit utopian demands as naive, impossible and dangerous, the climate movement’s demands act as an open future horizon beyond the dominant capitalist system (Laclau, 1990). There are already cracks in the fossil fuel sector, where gas is promoted as ‘clean’ in comparison to coal. The competing interests between different sectors of the fossil fuel industry are, perhaps, indicative of the possibility to split the elite upholding the fossil fuel hegemony by capturing energy demands with renewable and progressive alternatives. Anti-anti-utopian politics can be used to break the hegemonic trajectory of perpetual status quo.

Conclusion

The growing urgency of political and social debate about climate change implicitly involves competing imaginaries of the near and far future (C. Wright et al., 2013). The emergence of a widespread social movement for climate action fundamentally challenges prevailing assumptions that life will continue much as it has over coming decades. In contrast to the hegemonic ‘common sense’ that the future will be based on the present, climate activists present a very different and stark choice in which continuing with the current economic model will result in a dystopian future of catastrophic heating and a world incompatible with organized human existence (New et al., 2011). As the material consequences of climate disruption become more and more evident, so the dominant imagining is challenged. This not only opens political space for climate activists to challenge the flawed thinking of the prevailing hegemony but also presents alternative imaginaries of a future in which we end the world’s addiction to fossil energy and rebuild the natural systems upon which our species and many others depend. In this regard, we support the potential of utopian thinking in mobilizing climate action. As the writer Kim Stanley Robinson (2018) has presciently argued, it is crucial to ‘keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how they might get better’.

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Appendix. Coding concepts.

Imaginary	Key discourses (codes)	Examples
(1) Green utopian fantasy	Uninformed	'So this analogy that renewables equals climate solution is actually not all that true and actually is only some of the task ahead of us.' (114)
	An impossible dream	'The social media movement has been extremely effective in spreading misinformation and distrust and fear into those that generally don't – aren't particularly interested, or just aren't informed.' (155)
	Emotional idealists	'... part of the problem is that people think that renewables are cheaper. But they're just not.' (155) 'I can remember when those same groups came out when the Paris deal was announced. They said, this is the end of coal. What a con job! They're smart enough to know the difference.' (130)
	Children's fantasy	'... what makes a good Greenpeace activist and it basically is young, idealistic, knows nothing about business, knows nothing about government and hates both.' (17) 'At a high level like climate change, emissions reduction, easily gets emotive. Clean and green is much easier appetite and for quick grabs from politicians that the public likes.' (114)
(2) Dark dystopian future	Disruptive protest	'Children are more naive, more lacking in experience and more instinctively self-righteous than most adults – so it is striking that greens view them as the ideal mouthpieces for green ideology.' (newspaper op-ed) 'The younger generation are speaking up because they're concerned at probably a more Armageddon-like future that sometimes gets presented to them which I'm not – it is possible but unlikely, but we all should step in.' (18) 'A bunch of serial offenders, the extreme green protesters who call themselves the Extinction Rebellion, are going the right way about causing their own extinction with their continual disruption of people.' (Conservative MP speech to House of Representatives) 'I don't think it's that the protesters aren't liked or haven't been effective, I think the latest manifestations of the campaigning have been probably a bit too disruptive.' (12) 'It is disappointing that green activists are holding back massive job creating resources projects at a time when regional Queensland is crying out for employment.' (QRC media release, 25 August 2018) 'The people who lock themselves onto moving pieces of machinery that if you touch it will kill you, are young idiots. Their families will suffer but also the people who operate that machinery or drive those trains will suffer as well.' (144)
	Anti-progress	'It's about equity between regions so that the cost doesn't all fall on clusters of regional communities, so they don't have high suicide rates; because you could close the coal industry tomorrow and put aside the fact the lights will go out, but say you did what the Greens wanted, life wouldn't change in the cities.' (130)
	Promoting inequality	'If you rely too much on a social justice argument to guilt us – you know, we, the wealthy world, feel guilty about using coal to make electricity and you want to shut down Adani – well, Adani, all of the coal is going to India to bring utility grade power to about 300 million people, who currently live in subsistence agriculture.' (11) 'The fact the green lobby so often pushes children to the forefront of its propaganda is revealing. It confirms that this is a quite morally infantile movement.' (newspaper op-ed).
	Corrupting influence	'The social media movement has been extremely effective in spreading misinformation and distrust and fear into those that generally don't – aren't particularly interested, or just aren't informed.' (155)
(3) Utopian technofix	Profit and innovation	'So they made a profit out of this, it saved them money. So, rather than incurring a tax, they saved considerably, and they've been leaders in – not just the technology development – but also the policy drivers.' (128) 'What we're saying now is actually, coal is here to power our future and also fund that new energy future. That transition will need to be a sensible, very pragmatic and very well-planned transition.' (123)

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

Imaginary	Key discourses (codes)	Examples
(4) Status quo	New technologies	'What are the solutions, the technological solutions? What are the smart people working on so that we can have our cake and eat it too? We can have affordable, reliable and cleaner energy. So yeah, we're definitely working towards that.' (I14) 'Every technology since the industrial age has improved through learning by doing. Even a power plant today can still be cheaper than it was 50 years ago, so it ought to be factored in.' (I28)
	Carbon capture & storage	'I mean, carbon capture, I think it does have a lot of opportunity as well and there's some good initiatives going on there.' (I58) 'We've been active in CCS for many years and I think we will see the emergence of CCS in aspects and niche areas that is going to be really important. I think it's going to have to contribute.' (I57)
	Gas as a transition fuel	'Gas is a very responsive fuel. For those relatively short periods of time when electricity demand is really high and we're talking for periods of hours in the day or minutes in a day sometimes there might not be enough renewables available. Gas plays that role.' (I42)
	Business as usual	'I think the natural gas story still has a fair way to go.' (I57) 'The demand is high and the export volumes and value that we have seen in 2020, and what we understand to be a need in energy and electricity demand in the next few decades, means coal will be needed.' (coal company CEO testimony to Senate inquiry) 'I'm very anti-government intervention, very anti-more regulation than is required. . . We just think, rather than create more regulation on what is a very complex market already, the idea is to encourage end use participation in the demand side with their retailer.' (I3)
	Wealth generator	'The backbone of so many communities in regional Australia, the source of jobs, economic livelihoods, and dignity – dignity – for thousands of hard-working Queenslanders.' (Prime Minister's speech to mining industry conference) 'It's not good versus bad, it's actually about the future regional economies. It's about jobs, it's about building that resilience in communities.' (I23)
	Sensible centre	'... for me it's all about there can be a smooth transition. There can be a smooth journey, or you can mess with things and mess with the natural order.' (I16) 'I think we need to have sensible discussion to work our way through those issues that we can meaningfully deal with. . . . I think at the moment these sorts of debates where people think by inconveniencing others to argue a case – and I'd say to myself what has it actually achieved?' (I51)
	Pragmatism	'We have to be pragmatic about it. . . I find the International Energy Agency pretty pragmatic about this stuff.' (I14) 'I'd really like to see just a pragmatic, but positive story in terms of – don't over-egg it. Don't say we can go carbon neutral overnight; it's a big, expensive, difficult journey.' (I2)
	Responsible citizens	'We spent \$5 or \$6 million on community engagement; local training programs. . . next time we do it we hope there's enough goodwill and understanding that we're responsible corporate citizens.' (I5) 'As a director and even when I was in the executive of coal companies, doing the rehab, doing the right thing, trying to reduce emissions, trying to reduce waste and all that is something I have always pushed for. Working with the community, that sustainability thing is something I've always pushed for.' (I4)