

RE-PRODUCING A NEOLIBERAL POLITICAL REGIME: COMPETING JUSTIFICATIONS AND DOMINANCE IN DISPUTING FRACKING

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ABSTRACT

While the use of the pragmatic sociology of critique has enjoyed increasing academic popularity, the relationship between justification and broader power relations remains unclear. Recent attention to the concept of 'domination' suggests the need for a greater focus on how employed public goods reinforce prevailing social arrangements. In this article we explore the public debate over the expansion of hydraulic fracturing of shale gas (so-called 'fracking') in the United Kingdom (UK). This technology has generated significant debate and controversy. Through a detailed examination of public inquiries into the technology we explore how different actors employ discursive strategies to justify their claims for the expansion or rejection of fracking. Through this analysis, the article identifies how some of these justifications enjoy precedence over others within the prevailing neoliberal political regime. By explaining how such a political regime is constituted, our

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study contributes to better understanding how different justifications support hegemonic political ideologies.

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Over the last couple of decades hydraulic fracturing or ‘fracking’ has emerged as a highly contested issue. While an increasingly common industrial practice around the world, fracking continues to be widely disputed as evidenced by ever-present forms of resistance (de Rijke, 2013). In the United Kingdom, public awareness of fracking surged following the highly publicised incidents of two earthquakes in Blackpool in the spring of 2011 that were reportedly caused by fracking (Green, Styles, & Baptie, 2012). Since these incidents, the continuance of fracking in the United Kingdom has been met with fierce protests (Vaughan, 2014), prime ministerial support (Watt, 2014), and the commission of public reports (Andrews, 2013). Fracking has turned into a public debate of opposing justifications for its (dis)continuation. In these processes of justification, individuals and groups attempt to explain and defend their positions on fracking to others by referring to normative principles they consider defensible.

Fracking in the United Kingdom can purposefully be characterised as what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) refer to as a ‘dispute’. Comparable to the scene of a trial, actors facing uncertainty partake in investigations, detail reports and put forward critiques to ‘test’ a disputed situation or practice in order to reach agreement (Boltanski, 2011). Firmly grounded in the local situation, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) provide a framework to understand how actors deal with disputes or disagreements by generating criteria and expectations from societal and local discourses of what is good and right. The employment of Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) pragmatic sociology of critique to evaluate public disputes has recently gained traction in organisational studies (see e.g. De Cock & Nyberg, 2016; Huault & Rainelli-Weiss, 2011; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011; Taupin, 2012). By investigating the forms of justification of actors involved in disputes, these studies expose the politics of, for example, the public controversy of a nuclear accident (Patriotta et al., 2011), the corruption of the environment (Nyberg & Wright, 2013) and the domination of financialized capitalism (De Cock & Nyberg, 2016). However, while these studies provide insight into how situated actors put forward justifications, meet critique and reach compromises, they have downplayed the constitution of the *political regime* in which politics is played out. Understanding the political regime of reified formats, rules, procedures and knowledge within which disputes take place is important because, while ontologically ungrounded, the political regime gives the political process an arrangement and coherence.

To foreground the political regime, we examine how the fracking dispute unfolded by analysing four public hearings and subsequent reports that ‘tested’ the worth of fracking in the United Kingdom. Using a discursive perspective (Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), we show (a) how actors justify the (dis)continuation of fracking, and (b) the mechanisms of constituting a hierarchy of social goods. In particular, we explore how different actors use varying justifications to promote their agendas and the tactics wielded politically to ensure that some goods are dominant and a particular reality is taken for granted. In contemporary capitalist democracies, this involves reproducing a neoliberal political regime in which the sanctity of markets and industrial efficiency dominate rival appeals to environmental and community well-being (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

Our study makes a number of contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on discursive strategies by accounting for empirically grounded normative principles in socially constructing an issue. We provide an analytical differentiation between strategies constructing the meaning of an issue and strategies constructing the contextual political arrangement. Second, we contribute to the recent organisational studies engagement with the pragmatic sociology of critique by theorising power relations which shape the political process of public disputes. This extends Boltanski’s (2008, 2011, 2013) recent turn to ‘domination’ to explain the outcomes of disputes. Finally, we contribute more generally to organisational studies by explaining the constitution of the political ground, or regime, in which corporate political debates take place. Viewing politics as a continuing process, and upholding a post-foundational theory of the political regime, radically revises theories of corporate involvement in national and global politics.

PUBLIC DISPUTES: JUSTIFICATIONS AND DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES

A key development in understanding public disputes is the acknowledgement of social actors’ critical capacity to participate in political processes of justification, criticism and the exchange of argument (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). In participating in public disputes and debates, actors draw upon public goods to legitimate their position. For example, Patriotta et al. (2011) highlighted how, following a nuclear accident, different actors justified their positions by mobilising higher order principles that enabled them to eventually settle the controversy around nuclear power. Different political parties, non-government organisations (NGOs) and corporations justified their positions and evaluated nuclear energy by drawing upon different public goods, such as the effectiveness of the nuclear industry, energy price competitiveness and environmental friendliness. These are legitimate forms of common goods and, while often

competing, ordinary actors are equipped to critically debate the issue at hand (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

The disputed argument or policy can then be 'tested' to see whether it conforms to these social goods (Boltanski, 2013). *Reality tests* examine which claims are justified against articulated values or goods (Boltanski, 2011). These reality tests are a means to confirm or contest the disputed situation and the claims expressed therein. For example, whether increased immigration leads to eroded social welfare, whether nuclear energy is environmental friendly or whether lower taxes lead to national economic competitiveness. The actors' positions can be criticised by showing that the justification does not conform to the format or good invoked (that in contrast, immigration leads to improved social welfare), or to the format itself (solidarity rather than monetary calculation should steer immigration policies). The tests confirm or challenge a given constructed reality by reducing the uncertainty of the situation through agreeing on the qualifications and principles, or open up debate for an alternative understanding of the issue. These reality tests are 'drawn up according to predefined procedures and formats, to which their more specifically "local" implementation is bound to conform' (Boltanski, 2008, p. 46). Common examples include legal proceedings, elections, exams or public hearings. The test can then confirm the political order by validating the reality of the situation or, through critique, challenging the political order and open up the potential for reform (Boltanski, 2011).

In critiquing and justifying a situation, actors construct social reality by forming how society understands the issue and the policy at hand. The texts and talk in these disputes are not merely representing the world; they constitute the reality for how actors (e.g. immigrants) and objects (e.g. nuclear energy) are made meaningful. The wider horizons of meaning thus become naturalised and the presented reality seems inevitable. To open up the possibility of critique and alternative interpretations, Boltanski (2011, 2014) makes a distinction between the socially constructed 'reality' on the one hand, and 'the world' on the other hand. The former is a process of providing meaning and orientation towards permanence, while the latter is the background of 'everything that is the case' (Boltanski, 2011, p. 57). 'Reality' is then a selection and organisation of certain possibilities offered by 'the world' at a given moment in time. Critique, drawing upon resources from the world, questions this reality and, 'when it succeeds in gaining a listening, transforms it' (Boltanski, 2013, p. 50).

Institutions, such as the family, religion or law and their collectively accepted rules, confirm the constructed reality (Boltanski, 2011). By articulating the reality, institutions bring about a particular form of society (Blokker, 2014). Institutions confirm 'what is important and what is not, what is to be valued and what has no worth' (Boltanski, 2008, p. 42). As such, institutions reduce uncertainties and functions to limit possible interpretations. There is a distinction to be drawn here between the instituted society – the given structures and materialized forms of the institutions – and the instituting or the reproduction of the instituted reality (Castoriadis, 1987). Critique, by drawing

upon the uncertainty or alternative imaginaries of the world, can question this socially constructed reality and transform it (Boltanski, 2013). Institutions thus endlessly have to re-confirm reality and protect it from critique (Boltanski, 2011). This allows for analysis of how justifications are engaged and the power configurations that are at play in confirming the instituted reality.

However, the outcomes of disputes are also dependent on 'how' actors try to influence the public debate. Actors use discursive strategies or linguistic devices to influence the exchange and get their interpretation across (Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006). The meaning of a practice or event is incomplete and contingent, and can therefore be formed through discursive strategies – systematic ways of using language to achieve political aims (Wodak, 2001). In employing discursive strategies, actors draw on different discourses – sets of interrelated texts – to 'try to fix understandings, shape interpretations, and justify practices in ways that are commensurate with their interests' (Maguire & Hardy, 2006, p. 10). For example, Maguire and Hardy (2013) explain how social orders are organised by different discursive practices. In their case, chemicals become 'risky' or 'safe' depending on how the meanings of the chemicals are held in place. Discursive strategies act as mechanisms for confirming or contesting the reality of the chemicals (Maguire & Hardy, 2013). Thus, actors use discursive strategies to stabilise meaning and provide directions for actions in a dispute.

In examining public debates or disputes, discourse studies and studies based on the pragmatic sociology of critique have different foci. The former emphasises *how* actors engage different discourses in employing strategies to shape the meanings of events, subjects and objects (Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Vaara & Tienari, 2002); while the latter focuses on *what* moral principles are mobilised and tested in settling disputes (Fuller, 2013; Patriotta et al., 2011; Taupin, 2012). The poststructuralist assumptions of discourse studies have been criticised for lacking any notion of good and undermining normative evaluations (Habermas, 1987; Taylor, 1989), leaving discourse studies in a 'bottomless, relativist gloom, in which opposed discourses or paradigms are left with no common reference point' (Geras, 1987, p. 67; see also Reed, 2005). This antifoundationalism is assumed to lack grounds for critique or evaluation (Howarth, 2013). While discourse studies does not support an extra-discursive morality, not all claims are equally valid and discourses provide standards and criteria for evaluating what is good and bad (Torfing, 2005). Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) thus provide direction in accepting ordinary actors' critical capacity to engage in processes of criticism, dispute, and the exchange of arguments based on legitimate forms of common goods as standards of evaluation.

Even so, Boltanski (2014, p. 604) recognises that the stabilized world of the 'constructed reality is at the same time partial and biased, in the sense that it tends to reinforce asymmetrical distributions'. Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) symmetrical frame of analysis does not account for power relations (Gond, Barin Cruz, Raufflet, & Charron, 2016), or discursive strategies (Nyberg & Wright, 2012),

which severely limits its critical potentiality (Boltanski, 2011). This is where the engagement with discourse studies becomes fruitful in that these studies show how a particular reality is constructed through discursive strategies that frame issues and processes to legitimise actors and actions (Nyberg & Wright, 2012; Vaara et al., 2006). In constructing a particular reality, the aim of public discursive strategies is to appeal to a collective subject, such as 'the people' or 'the community' as the privileged subject of interpellation (Laclau, 2001). The strategies promote and naturalise certain meanings by building common identities and synchronising interests of goods or worth (Nyberg, Spicer, & Wright, 2013). This can be seen as a 'war of positions' in shaping society to win the public debate about an issue by turning a particular position into common sense (Gramsci, 1971). The social order of an issue becomes temporarily stabilized and accepted as reality. This does not denote a total identification with the social order or instituted reality. To the contrary, people can have paradoxical interests in, for example, caring about climate change and flying to their next holiday destination or academic conference.

However, the investigation of 'trials' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), 'wars' (Gramsci, 1971), or discursive struggles (Vaara & Tienari, 2008) mainly takes the politics into account, not the playing field in which politics take place. Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) framework of symmetrical common goods can thus be criticised for having a 'situationist' bias in that the context and condition of the situation are mainly regarded as resources, 'not as potential structural restrictions' (Celikates, 2015, p. 92). While public hearings or a governmental report may solve a public dispute, it would be naïve to expect the outcome to be based solely on the appropriate social goods that are drawn upon (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), superior rhetoric (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012), or the most strategic discursive tactics (Levy & Egan, 2003). In particular, underlying power relations provide the possibilities of claiming what is actually the case. The temporary political order, the instituted reality of society, thus confirms for and against argumentation what is going on in the world and these processes have stabilising effects. In Boltanski's words, 'we are dealing with domination over reality' (Boltanski, Honneth, & Celikates, 2014, p. 580). This requires uncovering the contradictions of engaged discourses and the hierarchies of recognised goods concealed by political arrangements, in which powerful actors behave as if they are non-existent or natural. It entails considering the political regime or 'rules of the game', where certain arguments gain traction in the dispute while still failing the appropriate tests.

This raises the question of how domination is upheld beyond the use of physical force. While recent studies have demonstrated how the construction of hegemony relies upon discursive appeals to common identities and the synchronising of interests aligned with recognised public goods (e.g. the 'national interest', 'economic development', jobs and employment see Nyberg et al., 2013), how such discursive appeals reproduce political regimes remains unclear. While, a range of different 'orders of worth' or recognised goods come into play in public policy debates (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), criticism of a practice is commonly

marginalised and rendered powerless. The domination of politics is then not dependent on a policy holding sway over people's identity or interest (false consciousness), but rather a reification of the political regime (Howarth, 2013); a taken-for-grantedness of reality. Domination is then the processes of maintaining the particular reality, while containing and limiting critique (Boltanski, 2011). In investigating the political playing field, we direct our empirical investigation towards the social order of contemporary capitalist democracies and how they are prevented from becoming otherwise (Laclau, 1990). This reification of reality silences possible critique and tilts social struggles in favour of dominant actors (Boltanski, 2008).

THE STUDY

This article explores the political process of developing public policy around fracking in the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2015. Unlike the United States and Australia, in the United Kingdom the debate over fracking is at a pivotal moment, with the practice yet to become a pervasive industrial activity. The uncertainties around fracking have resulted in four parliamentary inquiries over four years to establish the prospects, policy implications and risks of fracking for the UK economy, environment and society. The dispute over the (dis)continuation of fracking is a proper scene of trial in that a range of actors publicly justified their positions during the inquiries (Boltanski, 2011). In this controversy, the actors investigated the circumstances surrounding fracking and put forward arguments and justifications in public hearings to influence the outcomes of the four inquiries. It is through these texts (written evidence) and talk (oral evidence) that discourse is materialized and the social order reproduced or challenged. This section outlines in further detail the context of fracking in the United Kingdom, the four public inquiries, the data collection and the data analysis.

Fracking in the United Kingdom

Fracking is the process used to extract natural gas and sometimes oil from shale rock formations deep underground. As the gas is trapped within the shale rock the process involves drilling and then injecting high volumes of 'fracking fluid' (water, sand and a variety of chemicals) under high pressure into the bedrock to create 'fractures' which allow the release of methane gas trapped inside. The production of shale gas is not new. However, the combination of horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing is innovative and fully took off in its current form in the United States around 2003 (Howarth & Ingraffea, 2011). In the United Kingdom, the first activity using the combination of these techniques took place

in 2010 by the company Cuadrilla Resources which initiated exploratory fracking at Preese Hall in Lancashire. Resulting seismic activity led to a temporary halt in fracking activities (Green et al., 2012). Despite official government approval for the continuation of development (Harvey & Vaughan, 2012), additional political steps encouraging progress (e.g. planned tax breaks for shale gas extractors, review of trespass laws and financial incentives for communities), and fracking tests approved by local councils, at the time of writing no fracking has taken place in the United Kingdom since the initial explorations.

Data Collection: UK Parliamentary Inquiries into Fracking

Following the dramatic expansion of fracking in the United States (US) (the so-called ‘gas revolution’), the UK Government has since 2010 been a strong supporter of the development of a domestic shale gas industry arguing that this would lead to improved energy security, economic growth and jobs, and energy decarbonisation. Indicative of this intent, the then British Prime Minister David Cameron declared in January 2014: ‘We’re going all out for shale. It will mean more jobs and opportunities for people, and economic security for our country’ (Watt, 2014). However, despite government and industry advocacy for fracking, public concerns over the environmental and health implications of fracking have spurred a growing social movement of opposition. This ongoing political contestation led to the establishment of a number of parliamentary inquiries to investigate the expansion of a shale gas industry in the United Kingdom and provide recommendations for government in addressing associated risks and concerns.

Public inquiries and hearings are important forums in capitalist democracies for discussion of issues of public interest (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2012). However, public inquiries are often used to produce hegemonic accounts of how to interpret and make sense of an issue (Brown, 2000; Topal, 2009). In order to display neutrality and construct an authoritative account, they often rely on submissions and evidence from a diversity of expert and lay witnesses. In the four UK parliamentary inquiries into fracking, actors providing evidence included scientific and technical experts, representatives from major resource corporations, government officials and regulators, as well as NGOs and local community groups. The authority of the reports were supported by open public participation, fracking being an issue of general public interest, and report recommendations were based on a perceived ‘rational evaluation’ of the evidence presented. The details of these inquiries are set out in Table 1.

The first inquiry was launched on 24 November 2010 by the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee. This inquiry considered ‘the prospects of shale gas in the United Kingdom, the risks and hazards associated with shale gas, and the potential carbon footprint of large-scale shale gas

Table 1. UK Parliamentary Inquiries into Shale Gas Fracking.

Inquiry 1: House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee Inquiry into Shale Gas (HoC, 2011a; 2011b).

- Commenced November 2010
- 36 witnesses; 151 pages of written and oral testimony
- Inquiry report published May 2011
- Government response published July 2011

Inquiry 2: House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee Inquiry into the Impact of Shale Gas on Energy Markets (HoC, 2013).

- Commenced September 2012
- 52 witnesses; 193 pages of written and oral testimony
- Inquiry report published April 2013
- Government response published July 2013

Inquiry 3: House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Economic Impact on UK Energy Policy of Shale Gas and Oil (HoL, 2014a; 2014b).

- Commenced September 2013
- 83 witnesses; 540 pages of written and oral testimony
- Inquiry report published May 2014
- Government response published June 2014

Inquiry 4: House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Inquiry into the Environmental Risks of Fracking (HoC, 2015).

- Commenced December 2014
 - 76 witnesses; 361 pages of written and oral testimony
 - Inquiry report published January 2015
 - Government response published March 2015
-

extraction' (House of Commons, 2011b, p. 5). The Committee's report found that while the United Kingdom's shale gas resources could be considerable, they were unlikely to be a 'game changer' in terms of security of supply or costs. While shale gas might pose environmental and climate risks, the Committee concluded that 'there should not be a moratorium on the use of hydraulic fracturing'.

The second inquiry focused specifically on new estimates of the volume of gas available for extraction in the United Kingdom and the potential impact on energy. Despite this new data, this inquiry concluded that it was 'impossible to determine reliable estimates of shale gas in the United Kingdom unless and until we have practical production experience' (House of Commons, 2013, p. 3).

The third parliamentary inquiry was undertaken by the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee and also focused on the economic impact on UK energy policy of shale gas and oil, however in response to the growing public opposition to fracking presented itself as an objective investigation that would

‘stand back from the passion on both sides, and focus on the facts’ (House of Lords, 2014a, p. 9). Of all the inquiries, the House of Lords committee was unequivocally boosterish in its support for the development of the industry.

The fourth and final inquiry of focus in this article was led by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. Unlike the dominant economic logic of previous inquiries, the purpose of this inquiry was to ‘identify the extent to which fracking would be consistent with the United Kingdom’s climate change obligations...and the environmental risks’ (House of Commons, 2015, p. 8). Moreover, in contrast to the previous three inquiries, this committee expressed significant reservations about the expansion of fracking.

The four parliamentary inquiries provided a space for public debate around the contested issue of fracking, but also sought to establish an authoritative response and potential settlement to such debate. While the fourth inquiry fundamentally challenged the worth of fracking on environmental and health grounds, the prior three inquiries had already promoted a positive economic argument for the industry’s expansion, bolstering the government’s advocacy for the industry. In the following section we outline how we analysed the ‘talk and text’ evident in the four inquiries in an effort to discern how dominance is achieved in such forums.

Data Analysis

The aim of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to demystify the persuasive or manipulative characters of texts supporting relations of power and domination (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 2001). It is therefore particularly suitable for our interest in analysing public inquiries to understand how fracking is discursively constructed and the social order underlying the dispute. More specifically, CDA studies prefer to examine ‘naturally occurring’ language use in how texts represent subjects and objects with ideological effects: producing and reproducing unequal power relations (Wodak, 2011, p. 40). In our data analysis, we thus paid attention to (1) the discourses engaged and the justifications for and against fracking, (2) the discursive strategies employed to construct what fracking is and (3) the social order within which the debate of fracking took place.

In the first stage of analysis, the documents from the four inquiries were read independently by the three authors and we each identified interesting themes within the texts (Brown et al., 2012). These broader themes were then collapsed or expanded in discussion to identify the key discourses and goods engaged and expressed through the texts. The final discourses identified in the text represented the central arguments or justifications for the (dis)continuation of fracking and included codes of societal goods or adverse effects such as ‘beneficial for climate change’, ‘detrimental for climate change’, ‘environmental risk’, ‘water contamination’ ‘energy security’ and ‘economic growth’ amongst others (see Table 2).

Table 2. Justifications for and against Fracking.

Justification	Indicative Quotations	Counter Justification	Indicative Quotations
<i>Arguments for fracking</i>			
Energy security	'It would reduce imports and help maintain security of supply. This would be especially valuable given the continuing fall in output from the North Sea and Europe's reliance on Russia, its biggest gas supplier, highlighted by the crisis in Ukraine'. (HoL, 2014a, p. 5)	Renewables offer low-carbon path to energy security	'... a scenario which focused on demand reduction and renewables rather than shale would lead to a lower level of gas imports'. (Friends of the Earth, HoC, 2015)
National economic development	'My strong belief ... is that there is huge economic potential from the extraction of shale gas'. (Owen Patterson, Secretary of State for Environment, HoL, 2014b, p. 231)	Economic risk	'UK shale gas is not expected to be produced in substantial quantities until the 2020s, which leaves a small window of opportunity for investors in the industry, and runs a significant risk of stranded assets'. (Greenpeace, HoC, 2015)
Fuel cost	'... if the abundance of shale gas worldwide turns out to be as some people expect, that the gas price generally might become significantly lower.' (Chair, HoC, 2011b, Ev51)	Reduced gas prices unlikely	'what really matters in all this is the ultimate European gas price, because that will influence the overall price of gas in the UK ... the most likely outcome will be a continued high dependency on imports and continued reliance on high gas prices'. (Nick Molho, WWF-UK, HoL, 2014b, p. 207)
Jobs growth	'... there is a benefit in terms of jobs and skills too, which should not be underestimated'. (John Hayes MP, HoC, 2013, Ev59)	Employment from renewables greater than shale gas	'... compared to a dash for gas generation strategy, policies enabling a continued deployment of offshore wind farms in the UK to 2030 would ... create 70,000 more jobs'. (Greenpeace, HoC, 2015)
Climate change benefits	'The use of natural gas extracted from shale reservoirs has significant scope to reduce the UK's overall carbon emissions, as natural gas from shale will probably displace coal and imported gas in the energy mix'. (CEO of Liberty Resources, HoL, 2014b, p. 519)	Shale gas distracts from investment in renewable energy	'... the time scale for fracking the UK simply makes no sense if we are to tackle climate change ... the industry cannot develop significant production until well into the next decade. By that time we are committed to be seriously on our way to a renewable future'. (Frack Free Balcombe, HoC, 2015)

Table 2. (Continued)

Justification	Indicative Quotations	Counter Justification	Indicative Quotations
Stringent regulation of gas extraction minimises risk	'The regulations in the UK are some of the most stringent in the world'. (UKOOG, HoL, 2014b, p. 520)	Existing regulation insufficient for new technology	'Existing laws and regulations of the mining activities often do not address specific aspects of hydraulic fracturing'. (Mobbs environmental investigations, HoC, 2015)
<i>Arguments against fracking</i>			
Shale gas as fossil fuel contributes to climate change	'Dash for Gas infrastructure is incompatible with preventing the worst aspects of climate change'. (Nick Molho, WWF-UK, HoL, 2014b, p. 194).	Shale gas is less carbon-intensive than coal	'Fracking has also significantly reduced US CO ₂ emissions. In fact, last year United States CO ₂ emissions per capita were lower than they had been in any year since I was born'. (CEO of Liberty Resources, HoL, 2014b, p. 538).
Reliance on gas will divert from renewable energy investment	'I think the most likely impact will be that energy efficiency and low-carbon generation will be displaced' (Nick Molho, WWF-UK, HoL, 2014b, p. 206)	Renewable energy is 'intermittent' and needs shale gas	'Natural gas should play a supporting role in the development of a low-carbon power sector, by providing essential backup for intermittent supply from renewables'. (CCCEP and Grantham Research Institute, HoL, 2014b, p. 49)
Fracking risks local air pollution	'In addition to methane (from venting), local air pollutants from fracking can include particulate matter, volatile organic compounds and nitrogen dioxides'. (Friends of the Earth, HoC, 2015)	UK has strong regulations to address environmental risks	'Then you have issues such as flaring and emissions ... if this is done responsibly within our current regulation, I do not see that there is a danger to the environment'. (Owen Patterson MP, HoL, 2014b, p. 231)
Fracking process requires significant water resources	'Vast quantities of water will be used in fracking, typically 22 million litres per well'. (Frack Free Balcombe Residents, HoC, 2015)	Potential to recycle water used in fracking	'I think there is a development also in America to recycle the water, to keep it in a closed loop'. (Nigel Smith, British Geological Survey, HoC, 2013, Ev7)
Potential for water contamination	'It is clear that there are significant risks of pollution of water sources and of methane getting into water supplies'. (Martin Quick, HoC, 2011b, Ewv7)	Correct procedures and regulation will prevent water contamination	'Where there have been problems ... they have been to do with the poor sealing of the well nearer the surface ... It is our responsibility to ensure, along with the Health and Safety Executive, that those regulations are properly applied' (Dr Tony Grayling, Environment Agency, HoL, 2014b, p. 122)

Fracking causes increased seismic activity	'... drilling is unpredictable, and the faults in the geology in Lancashire make it completely unsuitable for this sort of activity'. (Residents' Action on Fylde Fracking, HoL, 2014b, p. 317)	Seismic risk is small and can be managed	'We have an earthquake somewhere in Britain, I read, every day. It is a very modest one and probably has the same drama in someone's house as a bus going past' (Owen Paterson MP, HoL, 2014b, p. 231)
Fracking results in the industrialisation of UK countryside	'We have already mentioned the risks of the road traffic that is travelling and carrying undiluted chemicals. We also have the waste water being transported. There are also issues that are going to arise on infrastructure that is going to be required to transport the gas once it flows'. (Residents' Action on Fylde Fracking, HoL, 2014b, p. 320)	Regulation and planning will limit industrial activity	'Broadly speaking, the planning permission decides if the proposed land is suitable for its intended use and also deals with wider implications for e.g., traffic movements'. (Department for Communities and Local Government, HoL, 2014b, p. 97)
Visual impairment of fracking	'The landscape implications of onshore shale gas production are likely to be visually and ecologically intrusive' (Campaign to Protect Rural England, HoC, 2011b, Ev8)	Visual impact of fracking are small	'The actual visual impairment arising from these wells is pretty minimal'. (Sir David King, HoL, 2014b, p. 360)
Noise pollution	'During drilling, they exceeded noise limits, disturbing our sleep. We had to buy our own sound testing equipment before they admitted infringing the limits'. (Frac Free Balcombe Residents Association, HoL, 2014b, p. 175)	Noise impacts of fracking are short-term	'On noise, the main noise coming from the Polish drills was produced by a high velocity diesel generator. Once you get into production the noise level is much reduced'. (Owen Paterson MP, HoL, 2014b, p. 241)

Second, we conducted an analysis of the different discursive strategies used in justifying their positions and constructing the reality of fracking (Vaara et al., 2006). In this process we inductively identified a number of discursive strategies by interrogating each text in terms of what the text was ‘doing’ (Maguire & Hardy, 2013); the systematic use of language to achieve political aims (Wodak, 2001). These discursive strategies were then separately recoded and adapted in light of the data, looking for patterns in the strategies across the key actors involved in the fracking debate (see Table 3).

In the final stage of analysis, we explored the assumptions underlying the justifications and discursive strategies. This step of the analysis was derived from the textual analysis of how the justifications and strategies assumed a particular reality in which fracking would take place (see Table 4). The analysis focused on the relations between goods, actors and worldviews as relations of power and domination – what Fairclough (2003) refers to as ‘ideology’. This final step of the analysis thus considered the conditions for the dispute in establishing a ‘common sense’ of fracking.

FINDINGS

The first section of our findings illustrates the key issues about UK fracking that were debated amongst the actors and how arguments for the (dis)continuation of fracking were justified by engaging different public goods. The second section explains the discursive strategies used by the different actors in criticising and justifying their positions in regards to fracking. In our third and final section, we then explain how these discursive strategies were employed to confirm a particular political regime surrounding the fracking debate in the United Kingdom.

Justifications for and against Fracking

As outlined in Table 2, proponents justified fracking principally around issues of economic benefit. These included the recognised goods of energy security, jobs growth and economic development. In contrast, opponents justified their position by engaging environmental goods and the adverse effect of fracking on the climate, aspects of the local natural environment, and health.

For proponents, the discourse of *energy security* rested on two key dynamics: (a) depleting oil/gas reserves in the North Sea resulting in the UK transitioning from a major oil and gas producer to a significant importer, and (b) the delicate political relationship with countries and regions from which the UK sources oil and gas (e.g. Russia and the Middle East). Advocates thus claimed that fracking could provide domestic gas supply certainty and end reliance on

Table 3. Discursive Strategies Contesting the Reality of Fracking.

Discursive Strategies		Description	Indicative Quotations
Promotional strategies	Enhancing	Stressing the importance or urgency of an issue	'If we do not proceed with this there is a danger that some of that skill base in the North Sea will go to America and other places for shale?' (Albert Owen, HoC, 2013, Ev8)
	Referencing	Appeal to scientific, technical or authoritative expertise	'A statistical evaluation of the approximately 400 peer-reviewed studies of the impacts of shale gas development in the Database found that 96% of all papers on health indicate risks or adverse health outcomes'. (Communities of Falkirk, HoC, 2015, p. 2)
	Bolstering	Building up the status or credibility of the organisation or practice	'Concerns that have been raised around water and air contamination and seismicity can all be managed by strong regulation and industry best practice'. (Cuadrilla, HoL, 2014b, p. 64)
	Anchoring	Engaging with past or current activities, decisions, experiences and/or precedents	'We have over 50 years of experience in this country of regulating the onshore oil and gas industry'. (DECC, Defra & DCLG, HoC, 2015, p. 1)
Relational strategies	Connecting	Linking the issue to another issue or interest	'Kent's economy relies on its agriculture and tourism. We know that fracking would cause large scale industrialisation of our landscape, and a large increase in road traffic'. (Caroline Raffan, HoC, 2015, p. 1)
	Differentiating	Declaring one issue/actor to be unrelated to another issue/actor	'The majority of oil and gas production in the UK has taken place offshore, which has meant that the immediate environmental impacts of the industry have had limited visibility'. (CPRE, HoC, 2011b, Evw8)
	Strategic ambiguity	Highlighting uncertainty about an issue/outcome	'there is so much uncertainty. But, as I said in my opening comments, the only way to book your reserve is to drill wells' (Professor Davies, HoC, 2013, Ev4)
Adversarial strategies	Minimising	Depreciating an issue	'First, the threat of earthquakes attracted significant attention. We have an earthquake somewhere in Britain, I read, every day. It is a very modest one and probably has the same drama in someone's house as a bus going past'. (Owen Patterson MP, HoL, 2014b, p. 231)
	Reversing	Reframing opposing arguments to illustrate the opposite point of view	'The use of natural gas extracted from shale reservoirs has significant scope to reduce the UK's overall carbon emissions, as natural gas from shale will probably displace coal and imported gas in the energy mix'. (Chris Wright, CEO of Liberty Oilfield Services, HoL, 2014b, p. 519)
	Rejection	Asserting that an issue is not relevant or is not even an issue	'A report by Poyry for Cuadrilla indicated a scenario where gas starts to flow significantly in early/mid 2020s, peaks in 2030 and declines thereafter. This indicates that shale gas offers no short-term fix to any perceived energy security problem'. (Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and WWF, HoL, 2014b, p. 183)

Table 4. Discursive Strategies Used in Confirming a Particular Reality.

Discursive Strategies	Description of Strategies	Indicative Quotations
Hierarchy of goods	Establishing an order or hierarchy of social goods (e.g. economic well-being and the market predominate over the environment or civic interests)	‘To what extent will we be able to frack enough wells in a given year to produce enough gas to have a real impact on our economy? That is the key question’. (Sir David King, HoL, 2014b, p. 357) ‘You cannot wish the electricity to be there if you do not want to build gas stations. Something else has to generate the electricity, particularly if the economy is growing. What else is going to generate that electricity in the next five to 10 years? Not wind farms, not solar panels and, by definition, not nuclear power stations’. (Professor Dieter Helm, HoL, 2014b, p. 294)
Standing of actors	Establishing a sequential order of actors and their roles (e.g. industrialists and commercial interests are more rational than emotive protestors and communities)	‘I am not saying that the residents in that area are lying. I am saying that the people who supplied them with the information – the people who have supplied that story, that scenario – were deceptive’. (Phelim McAleer, HoL, 2014b, p. 265) ‘Environmentalists should and must support the development of shale. Their opposition is ill-informed and needs to be reversed’. (Professor Muller, HoL, 2014b, p. 393)
Dismissal of alternatives	Undermining claims from alternative voices in the debate	‘The answer to the question about who leaves their carbon resources in the ground is someone else’. (Baroness Noakes, HoL, 2014b, p. 208) ‘this has gone beyond exaggeration and into actual mythmaking. When you look at the actual evidence for serious earthquakes, serious aquifer pollution, radioactivity, methane leakage – all these kind of things – the actual numbers are nothing like what an awful lot of people have heard and are worried about’. (Viscount Ridley, HoL, 2014b, p. 265)
Reification of business as usual	Confirming a particular reality, which suggests a particular action to follow (e.g. demand for gas will continue to grow, fracking is inevitable)	‘... continuing dependence on fossil fuels for the medium term are inevitable’. (Greystar, HoC, 2013, Evw30) ‘We will be using natural gas in this country for decades to come, so it is really a question of whether we are going to export our CO ₂ emissions to Russia and Qatar, or whether we are going to monitor and measure them here’. (Francis Egan, HoL, 2014b, p. 85)

external and unstable import markets. The discourse of energy security was also closely linked to the uncertainty surrounding the quantum of oil and gas reserves accessible through fracking. This led to the self-fulfilling justification of continuing fracking in order to establish the viability of the shale gas industry and its market potential.

The discourse of energy security was closely aligned with broader discourses of national *economic development* and *jobs growth*. For instance, the example of the US gas revolution was frequently cited as a demonstrative example for the UK of how shale gas could reinvent energy markets and drive new economic activity. Moreover, these benefits were argued to flow into the broader economy through potentially lower gas prices and areas of the economy such as the petrochemicals sector which relied upon stable and affordable oil and gas reserves. The *jobs growth* discourse suggested that the development of a shale gas industry at scale would not only remedy job losses from declining North Sea oil and gas but create jobs and economic development across the United Kingdom.

Fracking proponents were also aware of environmental criticism and argued that fracking was a beneficial activity for the environment. For instance, both industry and government stressed shale gas as a 'cleaner' fossil fuel with a lower emissions profile than coal. Given the United Kingdom's reliance on coal-fired power stations, shale gas from fracking was presented as providing a less carbon-intensive source of energy generation. Added to this any local environmental concerns could, it was argued, be adequately managed by the United Kingdom's existing regulatory systems which were seen as 'rigorous' and 'best practice'.

By contrast, opponents to fracking (including climate scientists, NGO representatives and local community groups) stressed the climate, environmental and health risks of a 'rush for gas'. For instance, opponents noted that while shale gas methane was 'cleaner' than coal in combustion, it would still represent a significant contribution to greenhouse gas emissions at scale. Moreover, opponents argued that while producing less carbon emissions than coal during the combustion phase, fugitive emissions from the extraction and processing of shale gas prior to combustion and methane's far more potent role as a greenhouse gas nullified the claims of shale gas as a 'clean' fossil fuel.

Indeed, opponents noted that if fracking was adopted at an industrial level in the United Kingdom, this would shape future energy decisions and deter investment from more climate-friendly renewable energy technologies such as wind and solar. Coupled with this, opponents of fracking emphasised the potential implications for local communities where fracking would be centred highlighting the dangers of water contamination, seismic activity, increased industrial traffic and visual and noise impacts.

The analysis illustrates how both advocates and opponents engaged established orders of worth to justify fracking; such as, the monetary value of the gas reserves and the price of gas (market), the efficiency of the industry

and the planning of fracking projects (industrial), the collective welfare of UK society (civic), UK fossil fuel traditions and the trustworthiness of central actors (domestic), and the environmental friendliness of fracking (environment). Their justifications were based on various interpretations available at the time and engaged a broad range of discourses – from the authoritarian regime of Putin to an indie documentary from the United States – to shape the meaning of fracking. However, considering that fracking is not a current practice in the United Kingdom and the uncertainty surrounding the justifications, the claimed value and public goods of fracking could not be tested against an instituted practice. Considering this uncertainty, different discursive strategies aimed at creating persuasive forms of argumentation. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Discursive Strategies Underlying the Contestation of Fracking

In promoting their own justifications and responding to rival justifications within the parliamentary inquiries, both advocates and opponents of fracking utilised a range of discursive strategies. As outlined in [Table 3](#), these included not only strategies that served to promote their own claims but also others which highlighted relations between different justifications, as well as adversarial strategies which sought to weaken and/or reject alternate claims.

Promotional discursive strategies took a variety of forms. For instance a common promotional strategy particularly amongst fracking advocates was what we termed *enhancing*, in which the importance or urgency of an issue was stressed. For instance, in his oral evidence to the House of Lords inquiry, Conservative MP Michael Fallon asserted that ‘This is a huge opportunity. Given the scale of the resource, we need urgently to establish whether it could be transmuted into a reserve’ ([House of Lords, 2014b](#), p. 169). This sense of urgency and national import was pronounced in other witnesses advocating a ‘dash for gas’.

In supporting such claims, actors also sought to link these appeals to scientific and technical expertise (*referencing*), as well as building up the status or credibility of organisations and practices (*bolstering*). These strategies were pronounced in the vexed debates over the physical and environmental impacts of fracking, with both advocates and opponents of fracking referencing peer-reviewed science in their claims for and against fracking.

Fracking advocates and opponents also sought to *anchor* their claims to past or current activities, decisions and experiences. In particular, the example of the fracking revolution and ‘gas rush’ in the United States over the last decade proved a perennial source of reference for both sides of the debate. As Lord Lawson proclaimed, the US example could be drawn upon as a model for future UK experience: ‘[I]t is happening the United States, so we do not need studies. We know’ ([House of Lords, 2014b](#), p. 198). The US example also

provided a powerful source of negative depiction. Reference to US documentaries, depicting residents setting fire to the methane contaminated water coming through their kitchen tap, featured in the UK debate: ‘The fact that shale gas (methane) has penetrated the water supplies in some sites in the USA suggests that the escape paths for the gas are not very well controlled’ (House of Commons, 2011a, Evw6).

Relational discursive strategies sought to draw links or distinctions between issues, practices and justifications. So for instance, the discursive strategy of *connecting* highlighted links between apparently separate issues as a way of strengthening an argument. An example here was the connection between fracking contributing to increased gas supply and thereby reducing demand for coal-fired electricity which would then reduce the United Kingdom’s greenhouse gas emissions and make a positive contribution to emissions mitigation. As the Chair of the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee outlined: ‘If people suddenly get lots and lots of gas, clearly that is significantly lower carbon than coal’ (House of Commons, 2011b, Ev32). By contrast, fracking opponents drew other connections between the environmental impacts of fracking and a range of associated issues such as water quality, pollution, aesthetic value and financial considerations of property value.

At the same time, other relational discursive strategies included *differentiating* between issues and practices, as well as using a form of *strategic ambiguity* to promote uncertainty about issues and practices more generally. So, fracking proponents often sought to emphasise the distinction between fracking and the contamination of aquifers and water sources. As resource company Ineos stated in its written evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Committee: ‘Research has shown, however, that this [methane leakage into aquifers] was due to poorly insulated wells rather than fracking’. By contrast, for fracking opponents emphasising uncertainty over the relationships between practices and outcomes was a powerful argument for precaution: ‘There are a huge amount of unknowns or people who don’t know in these surveys’ (House of Commons, 2013, Ev31).

Fracking advocates and opponents also employed a variety of *adversarial discursive strategies* which sought to attack and weaken their opponent’s claims. One common strategy in this regard was to seek to *minimise* or depreciate your rival’s arguments. For instance, advocates challenged claims of environmental damage resulting from fracking, arguing they were overblown and exaggerated. As the CEO of Cuadrilla Resources argued, ‘Frankly, there is more disruption from British Telecom digging up outside your house than you are likely to see from a six-inch diameter hole two kilometres beneath it’ (House of Lords, 2014b, p. 75). In a similar vein, fracking opponents questioned industry claims of significant employment if the industry was to proceed: ‘Basically, the claims are misleading. The industry claimed 74,000 jobs would be created and yet the *Financial Times* last month reported that they were forecasting just 15,900 to 24,300 nationwide’ (House of Lords, 2014b, pp. 324–325).

Finally, actors also often resorted to *reversing* the contrary position in the debate or outright *rejecting* particular issues. So for instance, the potential contribution of an expansion of shale gas extraction and use to carbon emissions and climate change might be reversed by arguing that shale gas is less intensive in producing carbon emissions than coal combustion. Similarly, regulatory concerns were frequently rejected by proponents arguing that the United Kingdom has strong regulations excluding any danger to the environment.

Both supporters and opponents of fracking employed similar discursive strategies in an effort to establish what fracking should be seen as. The inquiries were about the ‘whatness’ of fracking. While uncertainty of the dispute was not fully reduced, the outcome was in all cases (even when recommending against it) full governmental support for fracking. Ultimately it was the UK government that would decide on the future of fracking, drawing on selected recommendations in support of its preferred policy objective of ‘going all out for shale’ (Watt, 2014). Thus, rather than providing a settlement of the dispute, the inquiries provided recommendations to government as well as revealing a deeper confirmation of a particular reality.

Discursive Strategies Confirming Reality: The Political Regime

In our final empirical section we outline the dimensions of this dominant political regime confirmed in the inquiries and subsequent government responses. Four themes predominated: (i) the establishment of a hierarchy of social goods; (ii) the standing of different groups of social actors, (iii) rejection of alternative world views, and (iv) the reification of business as usual (see Table 4).

The political regime in which the debate over fracking took place had an established *hierarchy of social goods*. The dominant concern in investigating fracking was related to its economic implications. This was evident in the first three parliamentary inquiries in terms of the tenor of the evidence presented, the inquiries’ final reports and government responses. For instance, the House of Lords inquiry stated that: ‘We strongly support the Government in their objective to exploit these resources but believe they need to do much more to encourage exploration and get development moving’ (House of Lords, 2014a, p. 5). This was a position the government strongly endorsed: ‘We welcome the Committee’s conclusion that realising our shale potential in a safe and sustainable way could enhance energy security while providing more jobs and opportunities’ (UK Government, 2014, p. 1). A hierarchy was thus established in which a corporate friendly context for the exploitation of the resource was viewed as more important than environmental well-being; the social good of the market trumped that of the environment. Indeed, the dominant position of economic worth was a reality even environmental advocates were careful not to challenge in that their promotion of alternative renewable energy was also reliant upon claims of superior jobs growth and economic well-being.

This hierarchy of social goods was also expressed in terms of the *standing of different social actors* in the public contestation over fracking. Particular actors such as industry leaders and technical experts were seen as providing a more rational and authoritative account than environmentalists or community leaders. In particular, a recurring theme within inquiry recommendations was the need to overcome what were seen as the irrational and emotive fears of communities about the impacts of fracking. As the House of Commons second inquiry argued: ‘One key to community acceptance will be a robust factual response by government to scare stories’ (House of Commons, 2013, p. 4). Indeed, the potential for protestors to delay the expansion of shale fracking was expressly articulated in the House of Lords inquiry:

There is another problem on top of that, which is the fear that even though protesters, who are no doubt deeply sincere, have no case at all, they can demand a judicial inquiry into any proposed fracking enterprise, which will cause further considerable delays. Eventually the companies will give up and think that there are other parts of the world where it is simpler to get the permission. (House of Lords, 2014b, p. 232)

In this view, protestors were a less important group which could use judicial processes to delay the work of more important corporations and the resource industry. The implication was that economic worth also trumped the civic worth of judicial appeal. Thus government needed to dissuade public concerns about fracking by stressing its regulatory oversight, while also streamlining this same regulatory framework so that the industry could expand and flourish.

Beyond the establishment of the market and economy as the dominant order of worth, the dominance of a particular reality also involved the dismissal and *rejection of alternatives*. So the debate over fracking illustrated a deeper contestation over the future of energy policy and the potential for renewable energy technologies to challenge established business models. Evidence and inquiry reports presented a view of alternatives as impractical and inadequate. As one Conservative MP claimed in response to renewable energy options, ‘You are talking about technologies that are a long way off being commercially viable’ (House of Commons, 2013, Ev35). Similarly, those opposed to fracking on environmental and health grounds were invariably characterised as ill-informed, peddling myths, and even deliberately deceitful and duplicitous, ‘The opposition to shale gas, I concluded after looking into the evidence, was based almost entirely on myth making, driven by special interests’ (House of Lords, 2014b, p. 452). Thus opposition to fracking and the promotion of alternative renewable and possibly decentralised, community-based energy production could be dismissed as utopian at best and delusional and dangerous, at worst.

Finally, the political regime surrounding the fracking debate *reified the reality of business as usual* in which demand for cheap fossil fuel-based energy would continue to grow and large corporations would be the central players in the development of this new energy source. As industry witnesses, inquiry panels and government ministers emphasised, future reliance on gas was seen as

inevitable, irrespective of climate change, environmental or health concerns. In this promoted reality, British consumers were enlisted as favouring the jobs, growth and cheaper energy that it was argued would flow from the development of the shale gas industry. As Lord Lawson proclaimed, ‘I think most people in this country would love to have cheaper energy’ (House of Lords, 2014b, p. 203). A point further emphasised by the Secretary of State for the Environment:

We want to get started and let the benefits accrue. That will bring public opinion with us. They will see the wealth and the jobs being generated, and they will see the new downstream industries that will become competitive. (House of Lords, 2014b, p. 244)

Indeed, attempts to prioritise environmental concerns over the economic ‘reality’ of business as usual were ultimately dismissed by government. Hence, as the government’s response to the final Environmental Audit Committee report made clear, there would be no turning back on the development of shale gas as far as it was concerned: ‘There will continue to be a role for gas for many years to come, both for heating and in electricity generation This fact alone rather brings much of the Committee’s analysis into question’ (Department of Energy & Climate Change, 2015, p. 6). This assertion of shale gas fracking as the future path of UK energy production was re-emphasised in the recent government announcement of a fresh round of licences for oil and gas exploration covering over 1,000 square miles of English countryside (Howard & Hellier, 2015) as well as recent approval for drilling (Halliday, 2016).

DISCUSSION

In this article we have investigated the justifications for the (dis)continuation of fracking in four parliamentary inquiries in the United Kingdom. The actors mobilised common goods to support their interpretations and test the practice of fracking in shaping its meaning. To form the reality of fracking, the actors employed a range of discursive strategies: they used promotional strategies to bolster fracking or their position as actors within the dispute; relational strategies to construct equivalence or difference with other interests; and adversarial strategies to undermine arguments of opponents in the debate. Our analysis also identified another set of discursive strategies aimed at constructing the reality in which fracking was debated. In combining the pragmatic sociology of critique with a discursive perspective, our study contributes empirically grounded insights by differentiating discursive strategies in explaining the construction of a dispute, problematizing the relations between justifications in researching public controversies, and extending recent discussion of domination by accounting for the political regime underlying disputes.

Discursive Strategies and Confirmation of Reality

This study contributes to theories of discursive strategies by offering insight into the variety of strategies involved in constructing reality. The analysis supports research that has explored the centrality of discursive strategies as a means through which contestations are addressed and actions justified (see e.g. Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Spicer & Fleming, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). It is through discursive strategies that particular interests gain voice and others are silenced in controversial issues (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Previous studies have largely focused on the construction of particular objects, practices or events in discursive work (see e.g. Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Vaara, Sorsa, & Pälli, 2010). Dependent on the discursive strategies surrounding for example fracking, the contesting strategies attempt to have their position accepted as ‘fact’. However, in our case, there were no accepted ‘facts’ of fracking. The dispute was never settled (and is still ongoing). Nevertheless, the government’s approach was to treat the safety and profitability of fracking as ‘facts’. The government policy documents, the Prime Minister’s and the Chancellor’s public comments, and the introduction of tax breaks and proposal of new legislation, all point towards a settled dispute.

The main contribution to understanding discursive strategies is then to explain the ‘workings’ of the different strategies. Discursive strategies contesting fracking are ontic in explaining what is out there; in this case, the meaning and significance of fracking. This is in contrast to the discursive strategies confirming a particular reality. These strategies are ontological in reproducing a political layer of reality. These strategies attempt to conceal the obvious contradictions of the particular reality of fracking by confirming the reality in which the dispute takes place. Fracking was not deemed safe and profitable because it passed the reality tests and met the internal criticism that it will be profitable or the external criticism of environmental concerns. Instead, fracking was supported because it was a market opportunity, which in the neoliberal political regime trumps civic or environmental concerns.

Theoretically, this echoes Gond et al.’s (2016) findings that the discursive use of ‘orders of worth’ is not enough to explain the outcome of a test or dispute *and* that discursive strategies are not void of moral principles. In complex multi-stakeholder debates or disputes a range of competing justifications are engaged and the evaluative worth of these are inter-dependent on underlying or mobilised power relations. While Gond et al. (2016) showed the successful mobilisation of power relations in explaining the moratorium on fracking in Québec, we have focused on the underlying political regime in explaining the United Kingdom’s move in the opposite direction. By analysing the discursive strategies employed by the different actors, we highlight the instituted reality confirming fracking – the playing field of the dispute.

Justifications and a Hierarchy of Goods

We also contribute to the current employment of Boltanski and Thévenot's theory of justification to understand public controversies (see e.g. Patriotta et al., 2011; Taupin, 2012), by attending to the instituted hierarchy of social goods. Our analysis suggests that not all justifications or orders of worth are equal. To the contrary, there are hierarchies grounding disputes. While this is to be expected where a particular order of worth is the basis for events or activities in a specific setting (e.g. corporations acting in market regimes, see Nyberg & Wright, 2012), this study shows how the hierarchy of goods now stretches beyond conventional spheres. Within the civic practice of public inquiries enacted by politicians acting as officials, one would expect collective welfare to be the mode of evaluation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). However, this case demonstrates that the market order of worth is now the dominant concern in disputes over collective welfare. Our study thus contributes to a better understanding of how contemporary disputes are settled by the state within neoliberal political regimes.

In this political regime, the market is further validated and any protest must now be handled through the market's object *par excellence*, money. The government thus supported the proposal of providing a share of the market benefit with the local community. In contrast, the rules of the civic and green orders of worth were sacrificed on the altar of the market. Even public support, an obvious proof for politicians and democracies in general, was deemed superfluous in creating a market for fracking. This indicates the strength of the market in the political regime underlying politics in capitalist democracies. Our analysis thus brings these often-expected assumptions out into the open. This contributes to the development of a political dimension of Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) orders of worth by showing the constituted structure of the different regimes of justification within democratic governance (Blokker, 2014).

We can thus separate the politics in the hearings, in which different actors used a range of public goods to justify the (dis)continuation of fracking, from the political regime underlying the dispute. This political regime provides a broader register for how to account for the different justifications and actors within the dispute. It gives the politics a direction. The politics simultaneously institutes this political regime by confirming a reality and dismissing alternative worldviews. In our case, the inquiries were opportunities to articulate this reality by providing general accounts of the world and instituting societal principles and norms (Blokker, 2014). The public inquiries as institutions themselves give the impression of an 'objective' account of reality, while reproducing existing power relations and supporting the instituted reality (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2000). The inquiries state 'what is and what is valid' (Boltanski, 2011, p. 99), which protects the political regime from critique. They have a discursive function in constructing and reifying what the situation is and produce

classifications of objects (fracking is safe and economically viable) and subjects (the public is misinformed) (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000).

Domination and Political Regimes

This study also contributes to our understanding of domination in public disputes. In our case, the confirmation of reality ensured the market order of worth was the dominant mode of justification and alternative justifications were reduced to minor functions of supporting the legitimacy of the social institution of public inquiries. While actors protested against the practice of fracking, the neoliberal political regime was never called into question by the opponents of fracking. This does not suggest that they are consenting to the practice, or even share the political outlook, but rather that the actors are realistic in what they perceive it is possible to achieve (Boltanski, 2011). Actors do not demand the impossible by challenging the instituted reality. This is not to denote the simple dominance by corporations, but rather a complex domination by the state in support of capitalism as how democracies should be governed.

The domination is thus ideological in that it reinforces the asymmetrical valuation and distribution of public goods. The hearings then function to produce particular 'readings' of the situation, which (re-)produce ideological structures or discourses (Foucault, 1991). With no foundation, the political regime needs to be continuously confirmed and reified by institutions such as public inquiries (Boltanski, 2011). As such, the inquiries worked as 'truth tests' by confirming a reality that was not itself subject to debate in the hearings (Boltanski, 2011). The inquiries confirmed a political regime favouring the market orders of worth to evaluate practices, supporting market actors over other actors (including politicians), dismissing challenges to economic growth, and reifying the current political regime.

Our analysis thus supports Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) identification of the political ground in capitalist democracies as neoliberal, with the market discipline dominating the public sphere. However, in contrast to their analysis, the market did not appropriate the demands of subversive forces. As a result, the market, or capitalism, is incorporated and reified as the model for government, while, at the same time, having the autonomous role of criticising the government. The state is the guarantor of reality, but capitalism is its key beneficiary. Rather than offering excuses ('there is no alternative', or 'this is how the world is'), the government simply confirmed the domination of the market. Considering the importance of 'the economy' for any election, politicians can, as long as they claim to act in the best interest of the economy above all else, use the firm as a model for the state. The *raison d'être* for the state is then corporate profit through the creation of markets, furthering the political project of neoliberalism.

CONCLUSION

Over the last several decades the dominant political project across developed economies and indeed globally has been what is termed ‘neoliberalism’ (Crouch, 2011). As an economic theory, neoliberalism relies upon a simplistic normative argument in favour of ‘free markets’ and an active role for the state to ‘form’ or construct markets (Davies, 2013; Mirowski, 2009). Neoliberalism’s economic agenda therefore sets out a restrictive political view of the role of the state in contemporary capitalism aimed at the support (and creation) of ‘free’ markets in which profit-making can be best undertaken.

Our analysis of the four inquiries on fracking in the United Kingdom demonstrates how such a neoliberal political regime has come to dominate areas of society which have traditionally relied upon civic (and environmental) orders of worth. As we have argued, the dominant order in political life is now the market and our analysis has explored how this justification now enjoys precedence over all others. As critics such as Barley (2007) have argued this has resulted in a historic reversal of the role of government as a regulator of economic and political activity. Under neoliberalism, the dominant political actor thus becomes the multinational corporation with the state assuming a largely supportive role. The implications of this shift are profound and raise questions about the possibility of resistance to neo-liberal domination.

First, popular social movement is arguably no longer enough to challenge hegemonic blocs in public issues. Rather, it seems to also require forms of intra-elite splits, where either the business elite or influential political parties side with the protesters in the social movement. This was evident in Gond et al.’s (2016) study of fracking in Québec, where opposition political parties sided with critical social movements to ensure a moratorium. By contrast, following the fourth inquiry’s recommendation of a moratorium on fracking in the United Kingdom, the opposition Labour Party abstained from voting. Thus unlike the case of Québec, in the UK elite cohesion was maintained.

Second, the ‘reality’ as a selection of the possibilities offered by ‘the world’ suggests the possibility for critique. For example, in Patriotta et al.’s (2011) study, a nuclear accident opened up the possibility for new interpretations of nuclear power, while in our study earthquakes contested the safety of fracking. These incidents suggest that a narrow construction of reality cannot uphold the complexity of ‘the world’ (Nyberg & Wright, 2016). The materiality of the world can thus act as a source for more radical critique challenging how we ‘test’ practices and events in paving the way towards alternative justifications. Materiality can push things from the world into reality by producing instances which do not match the constructions of the dominant reality. The injustices of climate change, the impacts of fracking or the suffering from nuclear accidents acts as ‘existential tests’ in evaluating the produced ‘truths’ against peoples’ experiences (Boltanski et al., 2014). If these experiences are shared through, for example, social movements they can challenge the instituted reality.

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