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Misconstrued arguments about cultural theory

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The reader of Verweij et al., (2022) might get the impression that my article (Hansson, 2020) has cultural theory as a main target. That is not the case. The article shows, as I said already in its abstract, that "in the 1990s, climate science was a popular target among academic epistemic relativists. In particular, many STS scholars used it as an allegedly clear example of claims by natural scientists that should be treated as mere social constructions, rather than as reports on the actual state of the natural world." Since the 1990s, the prevalence of such attitudes to climate science has diminished drastically within the social sciences, but it is still important to understand how they arose and to investigate what impact they may have had. At the beginning of the article I listed five branches of social science that have a strong tradition of epistemic relativism, namely "social constructivism, the strong programme, deconstructionism, postmodernism, and major parts of Science and Technology Studies (STS)" (Hansson, 2020, p. 2). Cultural theory is not on that list. However, a small part of the article is devoted to Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, who are generally recognized as originators of the cultural theory of risk. I showed that they both expressed denialist positions on climate change. I did not extend this to a criticism of other cultural theorists or cultural theory in general. Contrary to what Verweij et al. ascribe to me, I did not claim "that cultural theory induces climate change denial".

Unfortunately, their reply contains quite a few inaccurate statements about what I claimed in my article. I will give two examples. First, Verweij et al., (2022) say:

> Hence, cultural theory does *not* argue that 'claims by natural scientists… should be treated as mere social constructions, rather than as reports on the actual state of the natural world', as Hansson (pp. 1 & 5) asserts.

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However, I did not assert this. The two passages that they refer are as follows:

> In particular, many STS scholars used it [climate science] as an allegedly clear example of claims by natural scientists that should be treated as mere social constructions, rather than as reports on the actual state of the natural world. (Hansson, 2020, p. 1)
> The great surprise of this investigation was the finding that in the early 1990s, climate change was a common target in the writings of epistemic relativists, especially in the STS genre. They treated climate science as a clear and therefore useful example of claims by natural scientists that should be seen as mere social constructions, rather than as reports reflecting the actual state of the natural world. (Hansson, 2020, p. 5)

Thus, I made this claim about "many STS scholars" and "epistemic relativists, especially in the STS genre". Verweij et al. misconstrue it as a claim about cultural theory.

The second example is a passage in which Verweij et al. accuse me of quoting misleadingly:

> Hansson's second prong of attack is equally misleading. He writes: "In a 2003 paper, Mary Douglas and two co-authors declared themselves neutral between climate science and its opponents, saying that 'we do not assume that one group's predictions are inherently more rational or accurate than another's'" (p. 10). Thus, he falsely suggests that this paper (and another one he quotes) is an analysis of differences in viewpoints about climate science between the majority of climatologists and their few critics. But they are not that at all. Rather, these papers predict that how citizens and political actors perceive the problem of climate change and its resolution tends to fall into four policy perspectives. That prediction falls squarely in the domain of the social sciences and has been empirically confirmed. Moreover, it formed the basis of our proposals for combating climate change in a far more effective way than had hitherto been done – proposals that closely match today's efforts to curb global warming. (Verweij et al., 2022)

I need to quote the 2003 paper at some length to show the context of my quote from it in my previous paper. What I quote below is the last three paragraphs of the 2003 paper that had Mary Douglas as its first author (my italics):

> *Does global warming put the future of the world at risk?* Is time running out? Or should we take our time in order to investigate and evaluate soberly the possible risks presented by greenhouse gases?
> *We don't have the answer to these questions.* But our cultural theory teaches us that vigorous debate among rival perspectives is the best way to address them. That is because the issue of global warming will never be resolved simply by making a rational choice on strictly scientific grounds. It is a battle, as well, between groups of actors with different perceptions of time that derive from conflicting ways of organizing and justifying social relations.

> Unlike the rational choice theorists, *we do not assume that one group's predictions are inherently more rational or accurate than another's*. Unlike the post-structuralists, we do not shy away from concluding with a normative generalization: If this sort of institutional turmoil intensifies as we approach various environmental limits, then one policy challenge will be to maintain and nurture a dynamic plurality of contending points of view. Wisdom will lie in remaining open to, and appropriately critical of, each one. (Douglas et al., 2003, p. 107)

The most natural reading of this passage is that the phrase "we do not assume that one group's predictions are inherently more rational or accurate than another's" refers to the predictions mentioned in the previous two paragraphs (such as that global warming puts the future of the world at risk), rather than to predictions related to four policy perspectives that are described earlier in the article.

Finally, it is clear from the assumptions in this exchange that Verweij et al. and myself agree on the reality of anthropogenic climate change and the urgency of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. That underlying agreement is much more important than the disagreements exhibited in this exchange.

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