

## Fear and Loading in the Anthropocene: Narratives of Transition and Transformation

---

Gerard Mullally

School of Sociology and Philosophy, University College Cork, Ireland

The play here on the Hunter S Thompson's 1971 novel is as deliberate as it is hackneyed. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream* is characterised in a Wikipedia entry as 'capturing the zeitgeist of the 1960's at the very point of its collapse'. It goes on to point out that the novel 'lacks a clear narrative ... never quite distinguishing between what is real and what is only imagined by the characters'.

The Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 took place against the backdrop of an on-going bifurcation in sustainability narratives where 'green growth' and 'climate change' have become increasingly central to contemporary debates, but continue to be subject to cultural contestation. Sustainable development *per se* has increasingly had to take a back seat. The anthropogenic loading of CO<sub>2</sub> and its equivalents in the atmosphere has contributed to a climate of fear in the early 21<sup>st</sup> wherein contemporary civilisation is actively contributing to accelerating its own demise. This paper is written in the context in which carbon dioxide has crossed a key threshold of 400 ppm concentration in the atmosphere (Irish Times, 10/5/2013).

There is now a burgeoning literature on the socio-cultural and socio-political dimensions of climate change in diverse disciplinary contexts in the humanities and social sciences, (anthropology, geography, history, literary criticism, philosophy, political studies, sociology,) and trans-disciplinary fields (ecological economics, futures studies, earth system governance). This literature is increasingly: (1) couched within the language of complexity theory (i.e. positive feedback loops, uncertainty, auto-poetic [self-organising] systems etc.); (2) concerned with the co-evolution of nature and society and the question co-responsibility for collectively addressing the anthropogenic sources of climate forcing; and (3) characterised as a new epoch dissolving natural and human history into a single grand narrative called the Anthropocene (Age of Man), (Crutzen 2000).

This paper is concerned with themes of *myth*, *narrative*, and *discourse* structuring emergent understandings of climate change and related crises in energy (peak oil), power (politics) and economics (global recession). *Myth (or mythology)* is understood in the anthropological and sociological sense, rather than in the more pejorative, common sense, fictional connotation. Mythology, (Simms 2013: 81-82) 'provides the discourse needed in extremity' the deep structures that could help 'the grand cultural project of understanding ecological transgression, and the quest for transition. *Narratives* ( Harre, Brockmeier and Muhlhausler 1999: 70) or *storylines* (Hajer 1995) are' the linguistic and cognitive structures of narrative discourse that we make sense of the wider, more differentiated and thus more complex texts and contexts of our experience'. Understood in this way, sustainability 'must become recognised as a contested, *discursive resource*, a boundary object that facilitates argument about the diverse pathways to different futures' (Leach, Scoones and Stirling 2010: 42). Drawing on Van Leeuwen's (2007: 91)

discourse analytic approach, the paper focuses on 'mythopoesis', the creation of narratives that provide legitimation for social action in public communication and everyday life. The paper is divided into two parts.

The first part of the paper examines three structuring metaphors (*Somnium*, *Soma* and *Somnambulism*) in contemporary academic discourse that are suffused with fear and where the end of an epoch in human history is conflated with the end of the world as we know it! In these metaphors there is contestation between dystopian futures and utopian possibilities. The first of these: *somnium* or dreams (Jazeel 2011) represents a transcendent moment where humanity can collectively rise above the challenges of anthropogenic climate change. This metaphor is used as a clarion call for a cosmopolitan response to climate change (*Only One Earth*), but is confronted with 'multiple modernities' (Kupchan's *No One's World*), the spectre of world government (Crichton's *Fear*) and a threat to cultural diversity and democracy (Klein's *Shock Doctrine*). The second more corporeal metaphor is *soma* a kind of drug extended beyond its pharmacological context in Huxley's *Brave New World* (Sliwa 2007). *Soma* when used in this sense, conveys a variety of societal mechanisms, that despite demands for social change, provide a form of inertia and stability that acts as a bulwark against collective action e.g. consumption, the divorce of politics and power in a globalising world and the trivialisation of academic/scientific knowledge in media debates. The final metaphor is *somnambulism* or sleepwalking (Kunstler 2005) where citizens' employ a type of cognitive dissonance to avoid confronting the scale of social transformation involved in a transition to a less unsustainable world.

The second part of the paper specifically examines the Irish discourse on climate change. It draws on three main sources examining (1) the framing of climate change in the Irish print media (2) the resonance of climate change narratives in public opinion surveys and (3) active attempts to 're-frame' the public policy debate to create a new narrative of 'a transition to a carbon neutral economy and society' (NESC 2012).

The paper concludes by arguing that a key part of contemporary climate change discourse is the fear (or hopes) surrounding the possibility of a *democratic* transition to a more sustainable society.