

The United Nations Narrative of Climate Change: The Logic of Apocalypse

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Abstract: This paper emphasizes the crucial role that language use plays in climate change communication. In particular, this paper examines UN public discourse and narratives about climate change. It will be shown that the climate change is often described as a "threat to human wellbeing" and as an external enemy—the Other. On the other hand, humanity is often portrayed as a victim of climate change. The consequence of this rhetoric and logic of apocalypse is insufficient action in relation to climate change. The narrative construction of the *Other* that is described as a threat is founded on binary oppositions: we/they, self/other, culture/nature, human/non-human and so forth. As long as climate change is described as an external enemy and "independent matter" and climate policy is based on binary oppositions, action to combat climate change will remain insufficient.

Keywords: United Nations, SDG 13, climate change, narrative, apocalypse, Other.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of this millennium, studies of diverse genres of text and conversation have stressed the crucial role that language use plays in climate change communication (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2016). "Since the first reports were published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), established in 1988, climate change communication has been considered as a challenge" (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2016). Fløttum and Gjerstad (2016) demonstrate the importance of the narrative perspective in examining and illuminating the debate surrounding climate change. Stories used to convey political and knowledge about climate change play a significant impact in influencing attitudes and choices in this field (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2016). Paul Ricoeur (1985) argues that a culture cannot exist without narration. According to Ricoeur, the "discordant concordance" of the work of narrative is created by the plot, defined in its broadest sense, as a configurative, integrative and transformative tenet (1985: 14). The dominance of the human need for the Apollonian ideal of

order above the Dionysian preoccupation with disorder is stressed by Ricoeur. Ricoeur (1985) argues that narrative is the foundation of all communication. He emphasizes the narrative character of culture and human experience. According to Ricoeur (1984), our perception of reality is mediated by narratives which contain various symbols and signs. Ricoeur states: "I am calling narrative exactly what Aristotle calls *muthos*, the organization of the events" (1984: 36). According to Ricoeur, the plot (which he defines as "synthesis of heterogeneous") represents the foundation of narrative paradigm (1984: 65). The plot of a narrative "grasps together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole" (Ricoeur 1985: x). Ricoeur (1984) claims that the concepts on which our reality is founded (such as "identity", "knowledge", "power" and so forth) are founded on narrative (Ricoeur, 1984). He argues about the power of narratives both to create and transform human experience. Narratives bring into language new experience and that for this reason they have the power to transform the reader's or auditor's experience and perception of the world. This transformation occurs by the intersection of the world of the narrative and the world of the reader (or auditor) (Ricoeur 1984).

Narratives are stories that are historically and socially constructed to explain events and occurrences and incorporate them into worldviews (Hinkel et al. 2020). According to a number of studies, narratives can be used to alter attitudes, behavior, judgments, and social activities (Shaffer et al. 2018). Narratives can also be used for diminishing prejudices "by inducing the reader to imagine the experiences of another person, increasing the perceived connection between the reader and the person in the narrative" (Shaffer et al. 2018: 431). Thus, narratives mold preferences and viewpoints that influence human behavior. It is commonly accepted that narratives, rather than actual climate information, are what ultimately motivate or disincentivize climate action in the context of climate change (Hinkel et al. 2020).

Narratives can also empower people to act upon problems such as climate change. In this context, Tabara et al. (2018), for example, put forward the notion of transformative narratives, which are bottom-up narratives that tell a positive and engaging story, articulate a vision of "where we want to go" and provide solutions for attaining this vision, rather than articulating problems to avoid (Hinkel et al. 2020).

"Grand narrative" as a concept is defined by Jean-François Lyotard (1984). Any comprehensive understanding and explanation of the social, historical, scientific, and political knowledge and experience is referred to by this phrase. Thus, metanarrative is the comprehensive explanation of events and ideas that results in the unification of knowledge and supports various power structures (Lyotard 1984). Postmodernists view all of science, all of religion, all of the numerous political ideas as metanarratives. Metanarratives therefore homogenize the human experience (Lyotard 1984).

According to Ricoeur (1984), narrative experience includes prefiguration based on the previous experience of the reader/auditor and cognitive phenomena that precede the narrative, configuration (the narrative plot) and transfiguration (which refers to the ontological status of the world which occurs in the encounter of narrative and reader/auditor).

Climate change is both an experience and a complex narrative (Bradley 2021). thus, it cannot be perceived as a metanarrative. It tells the story of science battling against the hands of time in order to create the necessary instruments, discover new worlds, and understand "our true impact on the planet" (Bradley 2021). It is the narrative of environmental justice, inequality, moral introspection, uncertainty and much more (Bradley 2021). People are impacted by the many narratives by having particular basic ideas, myths, and commitments that result from a variety of intersecting factors (cultural, political and social) (Bradley 2021). In the end, they develop and take hold based on how a person perceives and experiences the world (Ricoeur 1984).

For the climate change narrative, it encompasses varying myths, political and economic beliefs, cultural morals and ideals, and anecdotes; making them incompatible with one another. Throughout the media, online forums and social media, and academia, there are vigorous debates and discussions, and investigations and hypotheses that can either weaken, strengthen, or create new narratives. It is important to be educated on the many narratives to really grasp the issue at hand. Those aspects of narratives may seem complicated already, but things get much more murky and complex when climate change becomes the topic (Bradley 2021).

THE UN NARRATIVE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The United Nations has identified energy, the environment and social equity as three most important sustainable development goals. The Head

of the UN Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, UN Environment Chief called for "systematic shift to a more sustainable economy that works for both people and the planet" (UN News 2020). With the United Nations, 195 countries decided in 2015 that they could improve the world and adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals, which are built on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but go further, seek to incorporate the three interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development—the social, economic, and environmental dimensions—into a set of unified and indivisible objectives that apply to all countries (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 288). "The universal and so-called "transformative" SDGs aim (...) is to promote economic growth, social equity and environmental protection at the same time (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 288).

The goal 13 of the SDG Agenda refers to climate action. The UN 2030 Agenda states that "we are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations" (United Nations 2015). The goal 13 aims to:

- 13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries
- 13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning
- 13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning
- 13.a Implement the commitment undertaken by developed-country parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to a goal of mobilizing jointly \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation and fully operationalize the Green Climate Fund through its capitalization as soon as possible
- 13.b Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities (United Nations 2015).

Villavicencio-Calzadilla emphasizes that a society that is stable and secure for future generations depends on concerted action based on the broadest possible international collaboration since climate change is a

global issue that knows no boundaries (2021: 289). The SDGs, and specifically SDG 13, are positioned as a window of opportunity to strengthen the connections between climate and development, as well as to strengthen global climate action and lessen the risks it poses to development and the eradication of poverty (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 289). Despite its importance, it was difficult to come to a consensus on SDG 13's phrasing (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 291). Many developed and developing countries resisted the inclusion of allusions to climate change in the global agenda during the negotiations, claiming that the issues of climate change and sustainable development should be dealt with separately by the UNFCCC (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 291). The 2030 Agenda highlights climate change as one of the biggest issues of our time, and SDG 13 articulates states' worries about its negative effects, especially on the most vulnerable citizens (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 292). One of SDG 13's major accomplishments is that it has increased awareness of climate change as a crucial issue for sustainable development and its connection to the eradication of poverty (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 292).

The SDG 13 goal is connected to the UN apocalyptic narratives about climate change.

Most commonly associated with the last book of the New Testament in the Christian Bible, the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse of John, the term apocalypse means revelation and describes a genre of ancient literature that encompasses many other texts besides this most famous example. The patterns that such texts have in common is that, generally speaking, the revelation they communicate is some truth about reality paired with a vision of salvation, while they are also inextricably linked to specific historical and cultural circumstances, often characterized by crisis, of the time they were written (Eckenhoff 2021).

The UN public discourse often ties the climate change issues with apocalypse. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations warned that the world is on a "fast track to disaster", citing a new flagship UN study on climate change that shows damaging carbon emissions from 2010 to 2019 have never been greater in human history (United Nations 2022). Scientists argue that it's "now or never" to restrict global warming to 1.5 degrees (United Nations 2022). "Reacting to the latest findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN Secretary-General insisted that unless governments everywhere reassess

their energy policies, the world will be uninhabitable" (United Nations 2022). According to Eckenhoff (2021):

With the reality of the warming planet becoming more directly palpable in the more and more frequent extreme weather events and the substantial body of scientific research on climate change, the images and language commonly associated with apocalypse appear as an appropriate framework of reference to imagine the dimension of cataclysmic changes humankind is likely to be confronted with within the century.

Scientists from a wide range of fields are giving scientific data and carefully thought-out scenarios to the public and policy-makers in place of prophets getting visions (Eckenhoff 2021). Which of these scenarios will be the most likely to occur is determined by the intricate relationships between ecosystems, climate and human behavior (Eckenhoff 2021). "Studying apocalyptic narrative —both in its ancient form as well as modern cultural manifestations as in the relatively new literary genre of climate change fiction, or 'cli-fi'—can at least help provide some perspective on making sense of the current crises and imagine more vividly what they will mean for our future selves" (Eckenhoff 2021). Despite the spiritual solace that religion and myth provide in the midst of the apocalypse, apocalyptic thinking nevertheless frequently contains utopian goals as part of its critique of the present (Eckenhoff 2021). Thus, dismissing requests for a greener, more sustainable future as overly ambitious or unachievable frequently goes hand in hand with dismissing a doomsday scenario of climate change as exaggerated (Eckenhoff 2021). The ability to imagine drastic change and adaptability to shifting physical settings, however, depends, at least in part, on realizing the urgent need for change that an apocalypse involves (Eckenhoff 2021). "The challenge of this narrative framework consists in translating apocalyptic thought into action, on a collective level" (Eckenhoff 2021).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations revealed in a 2022 science report that climate change is about to get much worse, possibly resulting in a world that is poorer, hungrier, sicker, gloomier, and way more dangerous in the following 18 years with a "unavoidable" increase in risks (IPCC 2022). The report demonstrates that even momentarily exceeding the 1.5 °C warming threshold will have extra detrimental effects, some of which are irreversible (IPCC 2022). The report emphasizes that "we are not on track to achieve a climate-resilient

sustainable world" (IPCC 2022). According to this report, "the cumulative scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a grave and mounting threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future" (IPCC 2022). Even with only a few more tenths of a degree of warming over today's heat, children of today who may still be living in 2100 will encounter four times as many climate extremes as they do now (Associated Press 2022). The group of scientists at the IPCC claim that if temperatures rise by over 2 degrees Celsius from now, people will experience five times as many storms, floods, droughts, and heat waves (Associated Press 2022). Methmann and Rothe emphasize that:

The logic of apocalypse differs from that of the catastrophe. While the catastrophe represents the interruption of a linear development by an unknowable event, the apocalypse represents the (sometimes even teleological) endpoint of an accelerating development. Thus, time is not interrupted by but directed at a certain event. For example, in the Security Council debate in 2007, this is expressed in the paradigmatic statement that 'everyone's future is at stake now' (Aboud in UN Security Council, 2007: 35) (2012: 329).

PORTRAYING CLIMATE CHANGE AS THE OTHER

The recent IPCC report on climate change portrays climate change as a threat—an external Other, while humanity is portrayed as a victim of the climate change (IPCC 2022). The IPCC report states:

With its significant negative impact on natural systems, food security and infrastructure, loss of lives and territories, species extinction, conflict health, among several other risks, climate change poses a serious threat to development and wellbeing in both rich and poor countries. Without serious efforts at mitigation and adaptation, climate change could push millions further into poverty and limit the opportunities for economic development (IPCC 2022).

In the UN Security Council discourse, the climate change is often portrayed as an "external enemy" (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 327). The word "dangerous" is among those most frequently connected to "climate change" (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 327). According to Methmann and Rothe:

The usage of this term may not be so surprising given that it is used in the text of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) of 1992. In that particular context, the objective of policy is said to be the "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." In subsequent discussions and documents, however, this formulation turned virtually ubiquitously into "dangerous climate change" (2012: 327).

Methmann and Rothe argue that the UNFCCC formulation attempts to categorize the extent of human interaction with the climate system as dangerous, whereas the later term assigns this classification to climate change itself (2012: 327). Climate change transforms from a human-caused process to a "dangerous Other" (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 328). In the UN discourse "climate change is understood as an external and independent thing" (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 328). On the other hand, in the UN public discourse, humanity is portrayed as a victim of climate change (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 329). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states: "The battle against dangerous climate change is part of the fight for humanity"(UNDP 2007: 6). The former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan emphasized: "Climate change threatens the entire human family. Yet it also provides an opportunity to come together and forge a collective response to a global problem" (Annan 2006).

The UN discourse on climate change portrays global warming as an external antagonistic force that coincides with human limitations, so defining mankind as a homogeneous social space (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 329). The UN discourse on climate change often includes religious/biblical metaphors and signifiers.

Many of the consequences of climate change that are invoked throughout the discourse bear close resemblance to the four horsemen of the apocalypse: war, death, disease and famine (...)—for example, the "consequences of flooding, disease and famine—and, from that, migration on an unprecedented scale" (Beckett in UN Security Council 2007: 18).

This migration is described in UN public discourse as an "exodus of entire populations" (Methmann and Rothe 2012: 329). Methmann and Rothe argue that this religious component intensifies the conflict at society's edges to the point that climate change becomes the blatant

antithesis of humanity as a whole (2012: 329). The UN sustainable development goals discourse presents the climate change as an external force—the Other:

Climate change is now affecting every country on every continent. It is disrupting national economies and affecting lives, costing people, communities and countries dearly today and even more tomorrow. People are experiencing the significant impacts of climate change, which include changing weather patterns, rising sea level, and more extreme weather events. The greenhouse gas emissions from human activities are driving climate change and continue to rise. They are now at their highest levels in history. Without action, the world's average surface temperature is projected to rise over the 21st century and is likely to surpass 3 degrees Celsius this century—with some areas of the world expected to warm even more. The poorest and most vulnerable people are being affected the most (United Nations n.d.).

One of the biggest problems with this narrative is the lack of action on climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report emphasizes “immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions” to limit warming to close to 1.5°C or even 2°C (IPCC 2021). "However (...) when analysing the wording of SDG 13 it can be observed that states spurned the opportunity to accelerate urgent global action on climate change and promote climate justice. In fact, climate justice is not explicitly mentioned neither in the 2030 Agenda, nor in SDG 13" (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 292). SDG 13 makes no mention of the critical need for states, particularly wealthy countries, to reduce the carbon intensity of their economies, all of which are necessary to keep the increase in global temperature below 1.5 °C (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 292). According to Villavicencio-Calzadilla:

Thus, as constraining global climate change to 1.5 °C requires urgent and deep societal and behavioural transformations, SDG 13 could have included a reference to the warming limit of 1.5 °C as well as quantitative targets with specific timelines to limit and reduce global emissions of GHG in order to stay within that limit (2021: 292).

Villavicencio-Calzadilla argues that by doing so, SDG 13 could have not only been more in line with the transformative ambitions of the 2030 Agenda, but also taken into account the worries of the most vulnerable nations, such as small island developing states (SIDS), who have been clamoring for years to keep the rise in global temperature below 1.5 °C because it is, while not ideal, the only way "to stay alive" (2021: 293).

Villavicencio-Calzadilla emphasizes that "no quantitative objectives apart from target 13.a have been included in SDG 13" (2021: 293). According to Villavicencio-Calzadilla, the SDGs' emphasis on problems related to the existing paradigm for development and economic growth may hinder them from addressing the climate crisis and the injustices and inequities it brings with it (2021: 285). "The United Nations has warned of a 'catastrophic gap between what needs to be done on climate change and what government and companies are actually doing'" (Ghosh 2017). SDG 13 may have been more ambitious in bolstering efforts to combat climate change. Numerous G20 countries, which collectively account for nearly 80% of the world's primary energy consumption and CO2 emissions, aren't making progress in implementation of SDG 13 (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 294). Consequently, progress on SDG 13 'is falling short of what is needed to meet its targets by 2030'" (Villavicencio-Calzadilla 2021: 294).

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper is to identify the UN public discourse and the narrative paradigms about climate change that are often presented as an external enemy (the Other). UN narratives about climate change are tied to the logic of the apocalypse, and in these narratives humanity is often portrayed as a victim of climate change. This point of view is reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in particular in SDG 13, which deals with climate change. Agenda 2030 and UN climate change narratives reflect binary oppositions: human/non-human, victim/enemy, self/other and so on. As long as climate change is described as an external enemy and "independent matter" and climate policy is based on binary oppositions, action to combat climate change will remain insufficient.

Notes

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