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**Taking back control – “existential threat” and large group anxiety**

Presentation by Dr. Coline Covington at OxPeace 11th Annual Conference

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Last March, Sir James Bevan, chief executive of the Environment Agency predicted that in 20 to 25 years England would be in “the jaws of death” without enough water to supply our needs.

For many of us our expectation of continuing growth and prosperity and limitless natural resources is no longer sustainable. We are having to manage loss on a large scale; loss of resources, loss of industries, loss of traditional social structures. Globalization has created radical shifts in the world economy, resulting in increasing inequality, immigration and erosion of national identities. These shifts are deeply affecting our identity both as individuals and as members of communities.

Climate change is especially threatening because it confronts us with the fact that we cannot control the most elemental forces of nature nor can we stop the earth from its trajectory towards extinction. Every time the weather surprises us with unseasonal extremes we are reminded of not just our human mortality but the earth’s mortality. Paradoxically, the fact that climate change threatens our very existence, makes it harder to take seriously.

Change by its very nature is difficult for most of us to manage even in the best of circumstances. But climate change also challenges our world view that we can rely on a relatively homeostatic environment, albeit subject to the occasional vagaries of hurricanes and plagues of locusts. Galileo’s demonstrations that the earth moves around the sun created huge resistance as did Einstein’s theory of relativity. Both theories challenged the world view of the time and, as Thomas Kuhn was to argue in the 1960’s[[1]](#endnote-1), they also debunked the scientific paradigm based on the notion that scientific progress is based on “development-by-accumulation”. These revolutions in scientific thought call into question our most basic assumptions about how we perceive and understand our world. They radically undermine the idea that knowledge is a conscious and logical process that provides us with some sense of predictability and security, along with our belief that we are the centre of the universe and can shape and control our future.

Climate change fundamentally challenges our ability to predict what is going to happen in the future. Blake Suttle, a climate change scientist at University of California, Berkeley, comments:

*“We’re likely to encounter climate regimes that there is no precedent for in modern times of observation (and where there is no past analog data for)….Another (difficulty) is that biological systems don’t tend to behave linearly. …no individual population or organisms or species experiences climate change in a vacuum. Instead, any given species is experiencing climate change amidst all of the surrounding community members that are also experiencing climate change. So what we see are changes in interactions up and down the food web that can really drive predictions into disarray. (Interview with Blake Suttle, in “Predicting Biodiversity” by Julie Gould, January 18, 2013.)*

It is increasingly evident that, because of the diverse nature of ecosystems, we have only a relatively limited ability to predict the future and some change is happening faster than we anticipated. We are already experiencing the dramatic effects of climate change in floods, droughts, fires and the extinction of certain species. Only recently in the state of Louisiana, the residents of Isle de Jean Charles are the first “climate refugees” in the US to be given government grants to relocate due to rising waters. But, if this is any consolation, earth has experienced climate change in the past – e.g., between 10-11 thousand years ago, in the Pleistocene epoch, all of the mega fauna in the US went extinct within the span of a few hundred to a thousand years and yet new species evolved. What Suttle describes as the disarray of predictions opens up the possibility of new forms of life just as much as it foretells the destruction of life as we know it. Whether our own species will survive is another matter – and the real issue as far as we’re concerned.

The debate about climate change can be viewed as a conflict about control – how much control we have over our environment and how we negotiate this politically and economically. Territorial power lies at the heart of the conflict with all its attendant anxieties about the survival of the group. The preeminent concern is not so much about the destruction of resources as about who owns what and where – who has control over mother earth. Climate change deniers can be criticized as living under the narcissistic illusion that the earth is our possession, to be used as we wish, and that, like mother’s breast, it will always be available to us without running dry. This is a view of omnipotent control that banishes the anxiety of loss and impotence. At the other extreme are those who argue that we are the culprits who are single-handedly destroying the breast – this argument, unfortunately, views humans as more powerful than we really are. It is similar to the child’s egocentric idea that when mother is in a bad mood, it must be because of something she has done. Although humans can have a destructive impact on Mother Nature, she has a life of her own. When we are frightened of changes that are to some extent beyond our control, we tend to either deny the changes – to wish them away – or to take full responsibility for them in the illusion that we are in total control – e.g. the idea that we can “save the planet.” The reality is somewhere in-between and produces in our psyches what in psycho-jargon we call “depressive anxiety.” This means that we are aware of our own destructiveness and our own limits – a state of mind that for most of us is hard to tolerate.

In the Extinction Rebellion protest in London last month, protestors argued that saving the planet is more important than Brexit and should be given pride of place amongst the woes affecting our lives. As school girl Greta Thunberg, protesting about climate change, dramatically declared outside the Swedish parliament, “Why should we go to school when there’s no future?” On the other hand, some onlookers in London disagreed with the protest, claiming that Brexit and knife crime are more important issues than climate change. What is so striking about these seemingly disparate views is that they come from the same emotional experience of fear and impotence. The zeitgeist in most developed countries is, “everything is changing, nothing can be relied on, there is more competition than ever before, basic survival is not as assured as it seemed to be fifty years ago, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and even if you have all the advantages on offer there is no guarantee of a good life.” At heart the question is, “What kind of future is there for us?” and, even more fundamentally, “*Is* there a future for us?”

It is no coincidence that climate change deniers are allied with populist movements. But what is the psychology behind this and how is it culture specific?

When immediate economic and political survival is threatened, the issue of climate change needs to be understood through the lens of large group behaviour and the particular anxieties that affect group identity and cohesion and how identity has been shaped historically. A case in point is the US Tea Party position against climate change that followed in the wake of the 2001 twin towers attack and economic recession. The US was militarily invaded for the first time since its independence and this effectively marked a turning point in the American view of itself as an invincible world power. The recession, starting in 2007 that led to the collapse of Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers the following year, only underscored the vulnerability of the US in relation to the rest of the world. The Tea Party response was to revert to the frontier myth of a rich wilderness offering unlimited resources. Sarah Palin was photographed with her bearskin trophies as the “new” frontier woman. This was the Party’s way of trying to restore some illusion of control and omnipotence through the regressive belief the group could once again possess a wilderness with endless boundaries, like an ever-flowing breast. In this way, a segment of the US population tried to regain a sense of identity and security. Trump’s subsequent ascension to power and his mantra, “Make America Great Again!”, is a response to the wish to turn back the clock to a time when change was not associated with loss but with prosperity.

There is a very similar political dynamic with Brexit in the UK spurred by a sense of disempowerment as our economic landscape changes along with the loss of traditional social structures. Harking back to a time of greatness, the Empire, and viewing dependency on outsiders as more of a restriction than a help, is part of a natural response in the face of loss. We can see very clearly in both the US and the UK (and across Europe) that anxiety about loss of identity is managed by defence mechanisms of splitting and projection. The threat is located outside the group. In this way the group strengthens its moral superiority and identity while demonizing outsiders or those who disagree – creating a destructive and polarized impasse.

Another large group response to instability and loss of identity is to identify with the powerful aggressor. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a tragic example of this where, following Belgium colonization and over a hundred years of theft of the country’s rich resources, recent governments continue to collude with corrupt practices as a way of scrambling their way out of poverty and disempowerment. The entrenched levels of government corruption that are directly impacting on the region’s environment can be viewed as a form of large scale identification with the aggressor that serves to bolster an insecure group identity.

These examples illustrate how the historical and political contexts within different countries have an essential bearing on their views of climate change and their policy-making. Nowhere is this more evident as it is in contemporary China where climate change issues, once largely dismissed, are now assuming prominence in its race for world supremacy. While it is important to acknowledge the basic psychological dynamics of denial and destructiveness that are present in every human interaction, the specific external reality within which these dynamics are played out is also essential to our deeper understanding. As in the case of individuals, group identity carries with it a collective and historical consciousness that profoundly affects our relation to the world around us.

When reality threatens the way we live, our expectations of the future and how we identify ourselves within the world, then, as I have argued, we try to protect ourselves from loss through psychological defences such as regression and denial. And we look for leaders who promise to restore our illusion of omnipotence – and identity – by assuring us that they will take care of us no matter what.We seek the fantasized security of early childhood in which “mother” will take care of everything and we do not have to be aware of the injustices of the world, of inequality, and of changes which we cannot control.

The political scientist, Ronald Inglehart, describes a “tipping point” in democratic societies in which social and economic inequality reaches an intolerable level and creates a backlash that paves the way for authoritarian governance. Although climate change is not usually named as part of this process, it is an important factor. It is the poor who can’t afford rising costs in food, oil, and housing. It is the poor who are vulnerable to becoming climate refugees. It is the poor who can’t escape the path of the hurricane and, if they manage to, can’t rebuild their demolished houses. It is also the poor and for that matter the middle class who will turn to populist leaders who acknowledge their need for a better life. But populism comes with the cost of de-regulation along with the dismantling of legal structures, due process, and checks and balances. And, of course, it is not just democratic institutions that are attacked, it is reality itself in the form of climate change. As climate change affects us more and more, large group anxiety is bound to intensify and, from our experience so far, this is likely to provoke greater authoritarianism. We can, e.g., anticipate an increase in migration due to dwindling habitable land mass. If we are not quick in developing alternative methods of food production, due to climate change and isolationist trade policies, we can also expect much greater competition for food and rising starvation. If we consider these conditions together, they constitute many of the factors that have led in the past to war and genocide – as a means of maintaining group identity in the threat of extinction. In our omnipotent backlash, will we destroy ourselves before the climate does? Or will we find a way to migrate to another planet?

1. See Kuhn, Thomas S. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 1st edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)