



## Book Review

**Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman, *Discourses of Global Climate Change: Apocalyptic framing and political antagonisms*. New York: Routledge, 2015; ISBN: 978-1-317-67105-3.**

Reviewed by

**Diego L. Forte**

University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

E-mail: dforte@filo.uba.ar

Environmental issues have been subject to a strong debate since the 1990s and approaches have taken different paths, but discourses about time climate change constitute a topic rarely analysed systematically. Following Whorf (1956) we may say that if the way in which we speak determines the way we think, the different ways of approaching climate change are in itself an environmental issue. The apocalyptic framing and conservative business, economic growth and the roles of science and technology seem to be the most well-known elements in the discussion. But the use of these features shift according various interests, offering different perspectives related to different social practices. *Discourses of Global Climate Change: Apocalyptic framing and political antagonisms* presents a good insight into the discourses on environmental topics and the current debate in Sweden and the rest of the western world, providing a sustained analysis of 3500 newspaper and magazine articles from 2006 to 2009.

The book focuses on four different discourses that, according to Anshelm and Hultman, articulate global climate change: the discourse of Industrial Fatalism, the Green Keynesian discourse, the Eco-socialist discourse and the Climate Sceptic discourse, followed by a comment on the way the four interacted in the UN conference in Copenhagen 2009 and the afterwards. The authors end with a discussion, inspired by Ulrich Beck and Eric Swyngedouw, about how to understand environmental politics in relation to global climate change.

Chapter one, *Introduction: discourses of climate change and global environmental politics*, sets the scene characterizing briefly the four discourses before mentioned, its relation with different political approaches, the situation in Sweden regarding climate change and politics, and the method for data gathering and developing the analysis.

Chapter two describes the discourse of Industrial Fatalism. This discourse is presented as some kind of “capitalistic official discourse”, in which climate change is considered as a modern problem of actors that propose marginal changes to save the old structures. What this discourse proposes, according to Ulrich Beck, is that the same

industry that provoked the crisis must be used to control it. Large-scale technological development and more efficient innovations can solve environmental issues. This is the way of thinking supported by the Liberal-Conservative coalition government, major industries, parts of labour movements and the media and it is not just dominant in Sweden but globally.

Chapter three covers the Green Keynesian discourse, the second most influential in Sweden. Anshelm and Hultman, pose that this discourse is related to the classic social democratic confidence in the market as the engine of wealth creation, when properly regulated by strong government enforcement. This characterization shares many representations with Industrial Fatalism while criticizing it but without proposing alternatives. Deep reflections about side effects of industrial society and their handling are considered. For Green Keynesian discourse, climate change is not an isolated management problem but one of many symptoms in an deep ecological crisis which requires the change in the relationship between industrial society and nature, on the one hand, and the redistribution of resources, on the other. Sweden is ruled by environmental organizations, the Green Party, the Left Party, Social Democrats, etc. Its main demands include to change the roles of the state and science and technology considering their relationship with the dynamics and economics agents: new technology alone does not solve the climate crisis. Chapter four details the discourse of Eco-socialism. Considering the fact that Sweden holds international fame as a socialist utopia, even after two decades of neo-liberalism and marketization of the educational system, train infrastructure and energy providers, Eco-socialist discourse seems to be linked, in the international imaginary, to the country as a natural thing. Nevertheless, Anshelm and Hultman point out that this discourse begun in Sweden around the year 1972 with the alternative meetings to oppose those of the United Nations conference in Stockholm. Until 1990, this discourse was very influential, but after that it was marginalised by Industrial Fatalism and Green Keynesian discourse. It was retaken in 2007 through the mean of a group of writers and political commentators that put it once again in the spotlight. This discourse claims that the risks of industrialization are not worth taking. The alternative proposed is small-scale industry, decentralization and renewable energy technologies. It is represented by authors like Andreas Malm and his book *Det är vår bestämda uppfattning att om ingenting görs nu kommer det att vara för sent* (It is our firm belief that if nothing is done now it will be too late, 2014), who states the same urge Greta Thunberg poses: the house is on fire. According to Malm, huge shifts in climate conditions would happen when risk levels are reached. Also a representative of this discourse is Bjorn Forsberg and his book *Tillväxtens sista dagar* (The last days of economic growth, 2007) that narrates the relationship between economy and climate change: growth is a fetish worshipped by Swedish society. As outlined by Forsberg, the contours of a sustainable social system must rest on the principle that all economic activity that impoverishes ecosystems must end and that economy needs to be adapted to minimize environmental burdens. Economy must return to a locally defined context where the power over production and consumption are held by the members of the local society and not by

global market forces. This constitutes an alternative that is close to that proposed by García Linera for Bolivia and the rest of the world in his book *Forma valor, forma comunidad* (2009, Ways of constructing value, ways of community<sup>1</sup>) in which he presents an international alternative program based on familiar indigenous ways of commerce very similar to that described by Forsberg. The Eco-Socialist model considers climate science as an authority to reveal the destructiveness of industrial capitalist society and to compel immediate changes in basic economic structures, relationships, lifestyles, transport and energy systems, in contemporary capitalist society.

Chapter five describes the discourse of Climate sceptics of Sweden and its alliances with sceptics around the world. Even though they hold a recognizable ideology, the book presents them as a group in disagreement with the majority of the scientists regarding the anthropogenic cause of climate change, and the need to expedite drastic changes in the organization of Western Society. It is stated that scepticism comes from a small group of elderly men with influential positions in academia and large private companies with a strong belief in market society, a great mistrust in government regulations and sturdy belief in engineering and rational natural science. They claim that global warming is a scam and denies the greenhouse effect, considering it a product of manipulation in the data. But sceptics are not only Swedish: there is an international scepticism building collective arguments. Anshelm and Hultman consider that in spite of their denialist vision, they need to be understood because they are also claiming to save our civilization, based on their world view influenced by modern industrial rationality, the framework within which they had worked their whole lives. However, this group has given enough evidence of its will for exploiting resources to the ground without considering the consequences. In fact, that is what brought us here. They seem to represent the previous step to Industrial Fatalism.

Chapter six covers the months leading up to the United Nations conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 and its afterwards. It details Sweden's role in the meetings and examines different practices of climate change politics around the world. As this event set standards and rules for the upcoming years, and being the Industrial Fatalist discourse dominating in the meetings, central argument was that if international agreement on rational allocation of emission reductions could be achieved, the climate problem would be brought under control and the climate crisis resolved. This way, Industrial Fatalist discourse created a story in which the EU was the only power that could save the world from climate catastrophe, voluntarily shouldering the difficult role, but with unappreciated efforts. This narrative posits that it was entirely possible to recalibrate the relationship between industrial civilization and the atmosphere, providing adequate technical, legal, administrative and economic fine-tuning.

The book ends with a discussion about the climate change debate considering concepts like *risk society*, *post-politics* and *eco-modern utopia*. The debate presented by the book shows the different ways the analysis can be used to deepen our understanding of current

---

1 Reviewer's translation.

environmental politics. It concludes with a classification of three phases on climate change debate: 1. Political awakening, in which the issues of sustainability were almost turned into transitional politics under the pressure of climate change that ended in the signing of the Kyoto Protocol; 2. Smooth consensus of hegemonic eco-modern managerial politics, in which Eco-modern discourse gained support among politicians, business and environmental groups, forming the base for a compromise structured around the promise of a gradual transition to a low-carbon economy; and 3. UN Conference in Copenhagen and the triumph of Industrial Fatalist discourse. This phase proposes a hope for an eco-modern utopia that stands still in the form of a millenarianism.

*Discourses of Global Climate Change: Apocalyptic framing and political antagonisms* represents a deep case analysis of the main current environmental discourses in Sweden and its relationship with its counterpart around the world. Its main importance lies in the classification of discourses, its characterization and the analysis, and in showing how far we are to the narratives that can truly change our relationship with the environment and other species. Even though it does not present a case of discourse analysis in the strict sense, it constitutes a fundamental work for researchers in fields such as Environmental issues, Critical Discourse Analysis and Ecolinguistics.

## References

- Forsberg, B. (2007). *Tillväxtens sista dagar*. Stockholm: Ruin.
- García Linera, A. (2009). *Forma valor y forma comunidad*. Quito: IAEN-Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales del Ecuador – Traficantes de Sueños.
- Malm, A. (2014). *Det är vår bestämda uppfattning att om ingenting görs nu kommer det att vara för sent*. Stockholm: Atlas.
- Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, Thought and Reality. Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Massachusetts: Technology Press of MIT.