# Walls Against Nature? Social Defense Systems, Climate Change, and Eco-Anxiety/Terror Management

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**"Anxiety is…the biggest psychic barrier to facing the reality of anthropogenic global warning." Weintrobe (2013).** *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives.* **London: Routledge.**

**"Silence is the real crime." Hanna Segal (2013).** *International Review of Psychoanalysis.*

**"I believe it is the problem of how to influence policy, more than apathy or individual greed, that can make individual impulses to care for the planet seem hopeless or futile." John Keene (2013). Unconscious obstacles to caring for the planet: Facing up to human nature. (p.155)**

What can psychoanalytic principles contribute to potential solutions to our climate crisis? Weintrobe (2013) and Rustin (2013), while respecting the complexity of factors that sustain the ecological status quo (economic, political, military, cultural, historical, technological), assert that psychoanalytic understanding can illuminate the "structure of mind and feelings" that may contribute as well to understanding and intervening effectively. By understanding our own conflicted nature and our conflicted relationship to nature, these authors suggest that we may avert bio-spheric catastrophe and contribute to developing the optimal response. There is a critique of this application of psychoanalytic thinking (Benton, 2013) that argues that there is no empirical evidence for the usefulness of psychoanalytic thinking, that psychoanalytic thinkers over-value what psychoanalysis can contribute in the way of understanding all the complex socio-political and economic forces at play, and that psychoanalytic concepts at the individual level should not be applied to group-level phenomena.

Integrating the foregoing assertions concerning the value of psychoanalysis as well as a response to the critique, this paper presentation will suggest that responding to our global ecological crisis requires conceiving a multi-

disciplinary approach to a multi-valent "wicked problem", a  problem which has no definitive formulation (Marshall,2015) ---which would bring together, in partnership,  contemporary psychoanalytic principles and practices with other disciplines. Marshall (2015) describes how he has discovered that each  discipline ( from statisticians to scientists to economists ) believes that it has singular insight  into  the problem of human inaction in the face of climate change:

"…everyone seems to shape the problem in his or her own image. Climate scientists say that people don't understand the science. Environmental campaigners say that the political process is corrupted by oil companies. …a professor of statistics … says that our failure comes from our 'aversion to statistical thinking' " (p. 94).

This presentation will suggest that the most promising path forward, which can potentially resolve the challenge of siloed and blinkered perspectives, lies in  facilitating  communal dialogue which engages with psychoanalytic understanding of the individual,  group, and   inter-group psycho-dynamics generated by death anxiety (Klein, 1959; Benjamin, 2019;   Hopper, 2003; Stolorow, 2007) ; the empirical evidence  gathered by social psychology's "Terror Management Theory" (TMT)  research project (Greenberg, Solomon, & Psyszczynski, 1997),  which has persuasively demonstrated the impact of death anxiety on cultural and socio-political worldviews [virtually synonymous with psychoanalytic "social defense systems" ( Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960; Long,  2006) ]; and structured large group processes that enable communal dialogue with multiple disciplnes, with creative deliberation and collaborative action (Doherty, 2017 ; Fishkin, 2018 ; Weisbord & Janoff,  1995).

While psychoanalytic systems theory and practice have demonstrated the rigidity and toxicity of "social defense systems" in response to anxiety, the TMT line of research has  more specifically documented that an increase in death anxiety (eco-anxiety) related to climate change will  amplify attachment to a cultural and socio-political worldview, so that climate change deniers will strengthen their  arguments and environmentalists will amplify their advocacy. Paradoxically--- the attempt to increase  concern and responsiveness may increase anxiety ---leading to more socio-political polarization and inaction. Psychoanalytic systems understanding of these regressive defenses against paranoid-schizoid anxiety suggest strategies for allaying anxiety by organizing counter-vailing interactive processes and structures (Wallach, 2004).

This presentation will accomplish three objectives:

1. Demonstrate via screening portions  of the documentary film, "The Human Element" (Balog, 2018) , which with great effect attempts to counter the mind-set that humankind is separate from Nature, but may have a counter-productive impact as suggested by TMT research, which demonstrates that death anxiety amplifies social defense polarization;

2. Provide a summary of the application of social dreaming to climate change (inspired by the work of Julian Manley &  Wendy Hollway, 2019) in an attempt to obtain a reading of the social unconscious with regard to climate change AND embrace what potential "solutions" may be inspired by the generative and creative social unconscious (Lawrence, 2003; Manley & Hollway, 2019). The presentation will describe two projects: the first, a social dreaming collaboration with the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (a region of the world second only to Greenland in experiencing the depth and rapidity of climate change), which hosted a SDM with an interdisciplinary group (city planners and designers,  engineers, artists, architects, indigenous curators, etc.). The Land Art Generator project (Monoian & Ferry, 2014)  is a model for the kind of multi-disciplinary collaborations we were aspiring to. The second SDM project is set in post-Hurricane Maria (2018) Puerto Rico, with the focus on co-creating a Bionian container (Bermudez, 2018; 2019) for the processing of Hurricane-related  individual and collective trauma;

3. Suggest that there are effective interventions for structuring and facilitating dialogue between polarized groups on climate change, relying on democratic principles of inclusion, deliberation, choice, and impact (Fishkin, 2018 ; Doherty, 2017 ; Luskin et al, 2014; Wallach, 2004;  Weisbord & Janoff, 1995).

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