

Affectivization and Climate Change: Theorising a ‘Thirdness’

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Abstract

In this response I would like to take an academic, personal and Antipodean response to the paper *The affectivization of the public sphere: the contribution of psychoanalysis in understanding and counteracting the current crisis scenarios*, responding in particular to the potential for Semiotic Dynamic Cultural Psychology Theory to help us make sense of the variety of responses to the climate crisis, both denialism and apocalypticism. As I write we are now experiencing climate change-induced flooding, after recent catastrophic bushfires, and find ourselves experiencing the direct trauma of these events. I will argue that negotiating the affective and semiotic complexities of this phenomenon is a critical step towards climate action, one that also demands a novel theorizing beyond the field of psychology into contemporary post-human ontologies. I will argue for multi-species thinking and for a mourning that leads to response-ability.

Keywords: *Climate crisis, denialism, apocalypticism, contemporary post-human ontologies.*

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Hillendale Gardens

What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the primrose to the orchid, and all of them to me, and me to you? (Bateson, 1979, p.8)

Today me and my partner went looking for wedding venues. We are both in our 50's so we want something relaxed and meaningful. We drove into the valley from the Blue Mountains, down from the escarpments and past Lithgow until we came to the property called Hillendale. We were met there by Sarah, who showed us around her beautiful gardens and after 45 minutes or so came across this statue. In 1979 John Paul II, proclaimed Saint Francis of Assisi (Fig. 1):

“As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation—animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon—to give honour and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.”



*Fig.1: Assisi @ Hillendale
Post-Milan*

I read the paper *The affectivization of the public sphere: the contribution of psychoanalysis in understanding and counteracting the current crisis scenarios* (Salvatore et al., 2021) with fascination, given the fact that this resonated with my history as a family therapist well-versed in a systemic/dynamic approach to distress. It also resonated with my academic career, given the past five years has been dedicated to expanding beyond the cybernetics of the family to situate distress in wider sociocultural, political and ecological contexts.

I chose to write this piece both in a personal and academic voice as I have come to understand more fully in recent years that the two are as inseparable, as are the notions of the psyche and sociological discussed so eloquently in this paper. It is fascinating how the synchronicity of systems has meant that I

write this now for Italians, and that Firenze and Milan served as a setting for a personal rupture five years ago, leading intellectual developments I have mentioned. Milan, of course, is the home of Maria Selvini-Palazzoli, my clinical hero (Fig. 2), who whispered many times in my ear, as the death of my parents was followed by a tumultuous divorce of my own making. Everything is intertwined, including the powerful semiotics of Tuscany for a romantic Australian.



Fig.2: The original reflecting room of the Milan School of Family Therapy, Milan, Italy (4.2.2016)

Indeed since Covid-19 Raffaele De Luca Picione and our mutual friend Luca Tateo have introduced me to the wonderful world of Semiotic Dynamic Cultural Psychology Theory (SDCP) through a study we have conducted on distress regulation and time under pandemic lockdown. I have also written a further study with colleagues since then, *Remaining Human in Covid-19: Dialogues of Psychogeography* (in press, Degen, Smart, Quinnell, et al. 2021), focussing on mapping the material semiotics of viralscapes. I confess that my initial interest in cultural psychology also started in Italy, sparking a fascination with cities and their affective agency, and the role of psychologists as barometers (Rhodes, Azim, Saab et al, 2019). The practicing psychologist

has access to this collective affect, the symptom of which arrives in the therapy room embodied in the suffering person who cannot see the cultural forces that guide him.

Of course the authors of this paper would be displeased if I only heaped praise on them, and so I will now affectionately point out loopholes, even if it's from the boorish mind of an Australian.

In the paper they open by staying there has been:

...radical socio-institutional turmoil for the last decade. Xenophobia, values polarization and religious radicalization, racial and gender violence, weakening of civic infrastructures, spreading of fake news, declining trust in people and in national and transnational institutions, diffusion of far-right, sovereign and populist political cultures, devaluation of representative democracy and its institutions, sharpening of ethnic and international conflicts, re-emergence of the spectre of nuclear weapons, immobilism towards the climate crisis: these are some of the socio-cultural and political-institutional phenomena that mark our turbulent contemporary age (Salvatore et al., 2021, p. 3)

It is interesting to me that this is the one and only inclusion of the words 'climate crisis' which receives no further detailed attention through the rest of the paper. To me this deserves significant, if not primary attention, perhaps given here in Australia we are experiencing the direct, rather than vicarious effects about which I will now provide an account.

The Black Summer

Approximately 16 months ago was one of the worst bushfire seasons in our National history, a three-month period now called The Black Summer. Myself and my partner bought a house in Wentworth Falls, The Blue Mountains one month before the fires started. On January 4 the fires came within 3 Kms of our front step, a fire as big as Belgium, and we watched the helicopters dump water from the sky. By the end of February, a total of 18,983,588 hectares would be burned (Filkov, Ngo, Matthews et al. ,2020) and over 1 billion animals killed including mammals, birds, and reptiles (Dickman & McDonald, 2020). Koalas were the hardest hit, as they move slowly and then retreat to the tops of trees, curling into a ball for protection; 50,000 died alone on Kangaroo Island (Lynn, 2020).



Fig 3: *The Bell's Line of Road* (1.19.2020)

While Australia is known as the most fire-prone continent, climate change is considered to have contributed to the unprecedented scale of the fires during the Black Summer. Australian summer temperatures had been increasing since the 1970s, with 2019-20 serving as the second highest on record, nearly 2 degrees Celsius above the 1961- 1990 baseline (Bureau of Meteorology, 2020a). That year was also the driest on record, with National rainfall 40% below average, on the back of one of the worst south-eastern droughts on record commencing in 2017 (Bureau of Meteorology, 2020a).

And so now, one year later, we have recently experienced not unprecedented fires, but the worst floods Sydney has seen in 60 years, threatening many homes. Last month I had to drive down from The Blue Mountains early to be with my partner in Sydney, out of concern that the major bridge connecting us might go under water (Fig. 3). It is in this context that I ask myself what my Italian friends might have written if they had included climate change in their paper. Would the SDCP theory be enough?

Thinking with Other Species

We walked along the crumbling bushtrack,
The full moon dropping through the gums,
Down through the sparse limbs,
Their shredded bark hanging by balance-
Thinking in fragments
...above the entrance flannel flowers
Grown from the roots of an ancient fig,
Their blossoms closed against the dark.

Flannel Flowers for Juno- Robert Adamson
(Fig. 4)



Fig 4: The flannel-flower that only grows after a bushfire followed by a flood. We found it on Mt. Hay, Blue Mountains Sydney, in a once in a lifetime experience (21.3.2021)

This SDCP theory is a revelatory one for a family therapist given it provides a means by which systemic hypothesising and relational conceptualizations of distress might be generalized to the sociological. It allows for the beginning of a compassionate sociology that might see human brokenness on this wider scale. It becomes clear that the culture wars, focussed on Covid, refugees and race relate directly to material semiotics, with masks, kneeling, baking, flags, toilet paper, all taking on incendiary political meanings that transcend (or *'dereferentialise'*) the objects themselves. Binary thinking, amplified by the social media machine, dislodged from reality amplifies outrage (and fear) and *'enemization.'*

In terms of climate change it seems it seems three types of affect emerge, with two based on the same Judeo-Christian forms of *'social capital'*, manifested in different paranoid forms: triumphant anthropocentric denialism

and apocalyptic dread/resignation. The search for a *'thirdness'*, one that would support greater social bonds, is more difficult, primarily because it involves Staying with the Trouble (Harraway, 2016) and invites affects that seem to have no established words. Glenn Albrecht (2019), eco-philosopher and farm-osopher, has attempted to grasp it with the term Solastalgia, *'homesickness when you are still at home.'* Albrecht does not posit this term as an invitation to despair, but rather as part of an emotional journey to a new era called the Symbiocene. Miller (1998), referencing science-fiction writer Octavia Butler, coins this *'post-apocalyptic hoping'*, allowing for a possible world between the Utopian and Dystopian. Ryan (2015), theorising about *'posthuman plants,'* hopes for the restoration of species, but can settle for the memorialisation of those that have been lost. These writers are creating novel *'symbolic resources'* that may provide a way forward in terms of the development of *'intermediate settings.'*

The SDCP model falls short in providing a *'thirdness'* when it comes to climate change affectivisation, given it cannot provoke a radically different set of relations between ourselves and non-human species. Any news of difference requires an ontological, not simply a theoretical, one that makes further shifts away from the humanist/structural roots of semiotics.

There are actually many entry points to this argument. I will very briefly introduce these lines of thought. It is fascinating that even as far back as the 19th century classic semiotician Pierce (1992) was proposing a pansemiotics based on the claim that man was not the controller of the semiotic universe, but rather a part of it. This field leads eventually to contemporary vegetative semiotics which explores signs that occur independent of man, at

a cellular and tissue level. (Kull, 2000). Bateson's (1972) interdisciplinary work, of course, also led to similar conclusions, whereby the mind exists outside of consciousness and outside of the envelope of human skin, a part of the patterns that include all aspects of the living world. Roszak (1992) founded eco-psychology at this time, proposing an ecological unconscious as a substitute for the Freudian, one with built-in environmental reciprocity, from which we have become dissociated through industrialisation. The deep ecology mirrored these developments (Naess & Sessions, 1995) advocating for a rejection of anthropocentrism in favour of biocentrism.

Contemporary New Materialist philosophers, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1972) and Haraway (2016), pick up this tradition, freeing human thought (and writing) from humanist and structural traditions. Relations are rhizomatic (Fig. 5) rather than hierarchical, allowing for fluid and unexpected connections between disparate elements. Systems are symplectic, tentacular, assemblages subject to uncertainty and novelty, fundamentally less predictable than Bateson's cybernetic. These philosophers make the final break from structuralism, and even post-structuralism, producing organic forms of thought that mirror the natural world.

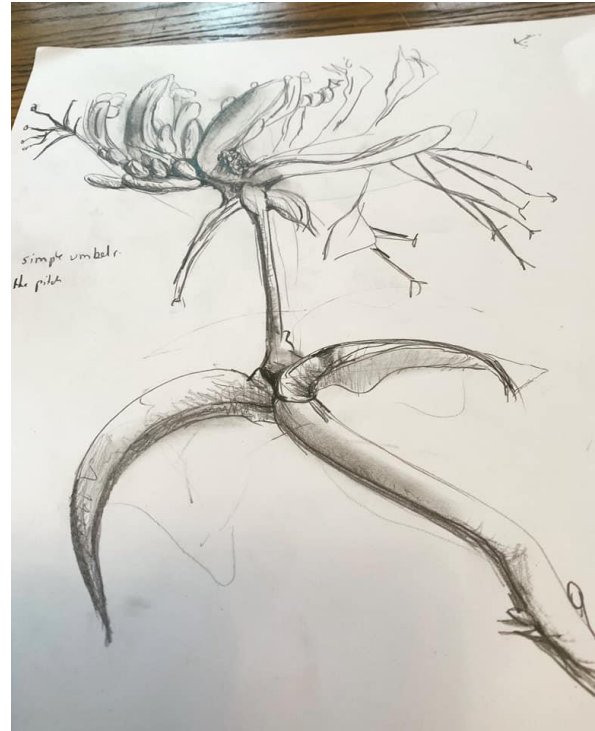


Fig. 5: *Rhizome as theory* (2.3.2021)

Here lies the 'thirdness' that is required, if we are to chart a path through the climate-crisis-affectivisation. SDCP theory itself becomes an obstacle, given it still relies on reified systems, dimensions and dynamics rather than the emergent, real-time, momentary crystallisation of relations. After the grief comes symbiogenic theorising, and anxious biosemiotics (Whitehouse, 2015), when writing reads like plants.

Coda

"Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."

— Haraway (2016)



Fig 6. Cicadas in our garden: they come out of the earth once every 13-17 years. (10.9.2020)

Of course, theorising affect is of little use if it does not lead to climate action. Multispecies ethnographer van Dooren (2014) positions grieving as a prerequisite to response-ability, mourning with the planet, not for it. Butler (2004) states that mourning can be a ‘*resource for politics*,’ the beginning of a transformation that might occur ecologically. Animals of course, mourn too, such as the Koala found by the riverbank on January 3, 2020 on Kangaroo Island, sitting next to his burned friend and rescued by the Humane Society. In fact, that koala was described as having ‘shut-down’ after the bushfires, with no reserves left after 50,000 of his species had burned to death. If we are to remain humane in a post-human world, we must do some rescuing too (Fig.6).

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