

# **UCD*scholarcast***

**Series 11 (Winter 2014 / Spring 2016)**

---

## **IRISH STUDIES & THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES**

**Series Editor: Malcolm Sen  
General Editor: P J Mathews**

© **UCD*scholarcast***

## Malcolm Sen

Assistant Professor  
University Massachusetts Amherst

### **Irish Studies at a Time of Climate Change and Sovereignty Loss**

“We live in a time of change”. That is a truism with a most impressive genealogy stretching across all of history, and across all cultures. And yet crucial distinctions are noticeable in our 21st century conceptualizations of the present and configurations of the future that radically disrupt a straightforward resemblance between past narratives and our disjointed contemporary situation. The *change* of climate change is of such geo-spatial magnitude and of such social and existential significance that there are very few real experts in the field. One thing is clear: a radical departure for humanity comprising of historical selves has now given way to an understanding of humanity as a geological agent. A shift from being makers of history to becoming geological forces, re-shaping the biology, and the basic chemistry of our planet; modulating, and often eviscerating its multiple biomes, ecological niches, its waterways, and its palimpsestic and heterogeneous topography.<sup>1</sup> We have even created a ring of satellites which one artist described as a ring of debris rather than of space dust like Saturn’s. These are the reasons why geologists are seeking to name humanity’s current geological era as the age of the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup>

This period of anthropogenic climate change that we are living in, is also distinguished from other periods of radical climate shifts. It is different, for example, from the Permian period that came to an end rather abruptly about 250 million years ago. At the exact point at which that period ends we see, as geologists, and indeed popular columnists such as George Monbiot, have noted: “the fossil record very nearly stops dead.” [Coral] “reefs die instantly, and do not reappear on earth for 10 million years”.<sup>3</sup> The difference from that extinction to a possible, some would say probable extinction of the human species, is simply that along

---

<sup>1</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influential article. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197–222. *CrossRef*. Web. 23 July 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/> Accessed August 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Monbiot, George. *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning*. London: Penguin Books, 2007. Print. Pg. 13.

with fossils we will mark another end: an end to language, to narrative, the basis of human civilization. This makes more precarious the possibility of future remembrance, the yet-to-be-written narratives produced by other sentient species.<sup>4</sup>

The change of Climate Change is radically dissimilar also to previous moments of historical, political, social and cultural upheavals. Climate change, the kind that is upon us, and whose exponential effects we have already begun to feel, is, as we all know by now, directly related to industrialization (starting from roughly 1750). That industrialization, the source of the classic Victorian fog sitting heavily in Dickens' and Gaskell's novels, as someone described it, is linked to a steady growth in fossil fuel use whose by-product, among other things, is a peculiar gas known as carbon dioxide. "CO<sub>2</sub> makes up around three parts per 10,000 in Earth's atmosphere" but exercises an "inordinate influence on the Earth's otherwise self-regulating thermostat" writes Tim Flannery in *The Weather Makers*.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with this the fact that CO<sub>2</sub> lasts in the earth's atmosphere for an un-imaginably long period makes it a determining agent of human history. As a recent newspaper article clarifies: "Between 65% and 80% of CO<sub>2</sub> released into the air dissolves into the ocean over a period of 20–200 years. The rest is removed by slower processes that take up to several hundreds of thousands of years, including chemical weathering and rock formation. This means that once in the atmosphere, carbon dioxide can continue to affect climate for thousands of years."<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary environmental policy narratives are aimed towards achieving two things: 1. mitigation targets through a cap and trade system to control national and global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and 2. adaptation to climate change effects. The logic that binds these two goals together is fiscal in orientation, revealing a skewed perception of societal growth and social stability through lenses that are determined by economic rather than ecological factors. The corollary to the avoidance of financial risk is the certainty of human peril. Speculation

---

<sup>4</sup> On the posthuman see: Roden, David. *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*. London: Routledge, 2014. Print. Also see, Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. 1 edition. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA, USA: Polity, 2013. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Flannery, Tim. *The Weather Makers: Our Changing Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth*. Penguin UK, 2007. Print.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thinkglobalgreen.org/carbondioxide.html>. Accessed May 2014.

about, to use a stock policy phrase “incremental and permanent decarbonisation”, upon which rests such capitalist utopias of a Carbon Free Future are just that: highly speculative and utopian. Thus, what the idea of progress was to the Enlightenment, the idea of Sustainable Economies is to our present condition. Both of these hegemonic, normative modes of social advancement are ultimately forms of neoliberal capital maintaining the primacy of capital as the determining agent of sovereignty per se.

The fact of the extensive life of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere makes us question the very narrative material that we use to speak of our futures through our politicians and economists. For example: in April of this year, 2014, the Irish Minister for the Environment Phil Hogan published the “General Scheme (Heads) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill”. The Bill, as newspapers reported, “provides for a transition to a low carbon economy by 2050 with a significant lowering of emissions as well as a situation in the agriculture sector where there is carbon neutrality (emissions neutralised by advances in technology ... and by carbon sinks such as forests and bogs” (*The Irish Times*, 23rd April 2014).

Climate policy at national and international levels has been driven by futurisms laced with the aura of economic possibility and moral and ethical progress. What such narratives obfuscate is the basic temporal conundrum of Climate Change: the Carbon Dioxide we have filled the atmosphere with over the last 150 years will keep warming the climate for very many decades into the future because of a phenomenon called ‘lock in’. The effects of this are beginning to be felt today and these effects will, exponentially, increase through a process called positive feedback loops. In essence what this means is that the warmer the climate gets, the better the conditions for it to warm further. Such scientisms cannot be accommodated within the rhetoric of recovery and re-gained sovereignty in a post-boom Ireland where, like all neoliberal hinterlands, the effects of neoliberal capital are felt the strongest.

Sustainable growth, in its truest sense, is a response to natural limits, content with compromise, averse to swift transformations, hopeful for states of equilibrium. For these

reasons it is directly opposed to economic progress which, in the final equation, is the legitimization of capital and capital as the legitimizing catalyst of sovereignty. The logic of sustainability is absolutely paradoxical to the logic of capitalism itself in which crises do not function as aberrations but are the stuff that makes capital tick, as Giovanni Arrighi once said. Since capital knows no limits, a fact pointed out by Karl Marx, (*Grundrisse*) it can only survive through the rapid use of resource until reaching a tipping point where, one can surmise, both earth and capital are conflated and devastated.

Ireland is a heavy polluter, quite contrary to its popular image. It emits about 15 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per person per year. This is “twice the corresponding figure for China and some 10 times the estimate for India.” As *The Irish Times* reported, “Surely, in equity, the biggest emitters should be the ones to make the biggest effort at reduction?” “The Irish figure is high because of the large emissions of methane and nitrous oxide from our agriculture sector.” Quite contrary to the Climate Bill’s claims “these are [supposed] to increase further as EU quota changes take effect in the coming years,” according to an earlier Irish Times report (*The Irish Times*, March 21, 2014). Ireland’s postcolonial rise in the globalized economy of a financialized planet actually corresponds to what Samir Amin has argued about the rise of the welfare state in general: in these cases some social goals are needless to say achieved but that is a carapace masking the consolidation of power in the hands of those who are already powerful, replicating a framework of empire within a postcolonial framework. This is quite different and far more malicious than an outright failure of a postcolonial welfare state. And the reason for this is found in current political philosophies such as Saskia Sassen’s that deal with the loss of state sovereignty in the hands of transnational capitalism.<sup>7</sup> We can see the irony now: that among the Five Guiding Principles for Climate Action underwriting the recent Irish Climate Bill the objectives of “economic prosperity, recovery and social development” are forefront in a catalogue that really resembles a new kind of utopianism.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Sassen, Saskia. *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Updated edition. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008. Print.

The problem, as I see it, is a problem of narrative and a limited understanding of sovereignty. I do not have any particular grudges against economists but I do take issue with it being graded as science. It is an art that, unless one is Amartya Sen or Jean Dreze, often services the rhetoric of neoliberalism and its self-normativizing grammar.<sup>8</sup> It is to this point now that I wish to turn listing what I think needs to happen within the humanities if it were to play a decisive role in environmental governance and in the shaping of our lost but narratively recoverable futures.

There are, to my mind, three main reasons for what often seems to ‘depoliticize’ environmental writing in Ireland. This is true especially in the case of aesthetic or ecocritical endeavors to read Irish literature, but is also noticeable in geographical and sociological studies.

The first reason is the ironically enabling and encumbering history of ecologically oriented, place-centric literature in Ireland that casts a shadow on viewing the environmental in contemporary authors as being outside of that tradition. A prevailing view in Irish Studies, that the subject of literature and nature has been so thoroughly examined in criticism that much of what follows can only be an elaboration or problematization of that critical history, delimits the possibility of a study motivated to involve the humanities within debates about the contemporary global crisis through lenses such as the financialization of nature. Thus while the place-name tradition in Irish poetics survives from Gaelic poetry all the way down to Heaney, that very lineage determines the critical apparatus used to read modern manifestations of place. While issues of what Edward Said once called the cartographical impulse of postcolonial narrative has been evoked to read such poems, Irish Studies has not yet comprehensively dealt with the incorporation of neoliberal structures which deterritorialize narrative from place: prefacing the displacement of future generations.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Sen, Amartya, and Jean Drèze. *The Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze Omnibus: (comprising) Poverty and Famines; Hunger and Public Action; India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*. New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

A second reason, intrinsically related to the first, is the relatively belated entrance of environmental literary criticism itself into Irish Studies. Critics of Irish literature and culture adopted cultural studies methodologies, postcolonial ideologies, revisionist historicism and feminist and queer theories with much more attentiveness than in the way they responded to justice-oriented environmental humanities deployed to read, for example, Pacific Island or South Asian literatures by eminent scholars such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and others.<sup>9</sup>

A significant part of the problem was embedded within literary and cultural criticism itself. As Rob Nixon, another thinker at the forefront of the environmental humanities has cogently argued: in areas such as environmental history, cultural geography, and cultural anthropology, “a substantial body of work arose much earlier in the borderlands between postcolonial and environmental studies” than it did in literary studies. He suggests that the reasons may well lie in a “widespread assumption that the subjects and methodologies of the two fields were divergent, even incompatible, not least in their visions of what counts as political.”<sup>10</sup> In the scheme of Irish Studies, speaking about landscape and environment seemed either too apolitical and effete, or, if those constructions were seen to be established through relations of power, and through empire, too politicized within the confines of Irish nationalist historiography to warrant any other kind of politicization. It did not help that the kind of cultural studies perspectives that literary critics tended to favor, generally speaking, did not insert the key dynamics of colonialism, capital and power in their analyses of the restructuring of the Irish landmass and eco-sphere. For such critical angles the radical work undertaken by materialist scholars such as Jason Moore will be especially helpful.

The final reason is a deep-seated anxiety in Irish Studies about the postcolonial status of Ireland. But how long can we paint with that brush?

---

<sup>9</sup> See DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan, eds. *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2013. Print. Pgs.233-234.

“How do we historicize lost futures?”, one Canadian friend asked me a few months ago. “What’s the point?” I replied. But I was being mischievous. The narrative of climate change is beyond the scope of political think-tanks and their economist gurus. Although exit polls and derivative market shares may be the mainstay of empire it is up to the humanities to provide worthwhile, life-informing speculation, rather than the kind of speculation offered by global finance, about our futures.

The reasons why the humanities can play a central role within environmentalist debates are obvious: the affective qualities of literary narrative have in-built capacities of projecting empathy and envisioning deep time in ways that the global market order does not. Literary dream sequences are a far better resource for imagining possible sustainable futures than the logic of neoliberal capital which always looks towards the future in order to place its consumers in an unstable relationship with their present.

Two years ago, speaking on the topic “Capitalism: The Opiate of the Masses”, Slavoj Žižek pointed towards our conceptual limitations about imagining the end of capitalism. “We can imagine the end of the earth, or the end of the world — that’s all very easy to imagine,” he said. “But to imagine a small change in capitalism, in the market, is impossible for us.” To reinvent capitalism is to start being engaged “in radical dreams”, Žižek said.<sup>11</sup> We have to unlearn the grammar of normativity surrounding fiscal definitions of sovereignty. Martha Nussbaum in her recent book reminds us that GDP is an average that does not factor in distribution – increased GDP has never been, nor will it ever be, correlated to increased freedoms.

So, for example, unlike the political policy narratives, that speak of keeping planetary temperatures from rising beyond 2 degrees Celcius, also suggest that a 2 degree rise will mean business as usual for planet Earth. A rise in global temperatures of 1.5 degree Celcius or less actually translates into something like 500 million people being exposed to water shortage, it means that we add at least another 5 million to the millions already hungry, and

---

<sup>11</sup> “Žižek Calls for Reexamination of Capitalism.” *Yale Daily News*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 May 2015.

it means the extinction of at least 18 percent of the world's species. Even the ceiling of a 2 degree warming is widely recognized as fanciful by many climate scientists who are expecting a rise of around 4 degree C in the next few decades.

From the precipice of climate change, we might all be seen as refugees (some more peripheral and delegitimized than others) scavenging for time. Nowhere is the importance of such conceptual pathways more relevant than at a time when the global marketplace itself trades in surplus rather than goods, excess rather than product, waste rather than commodity, futures rather than the present. The reference here is to carbon trading that is steeped in ironic rhetorical reversals. Let us acknowledge that the disembodied nature of carbon trading, under the scrutinizing gaze of the literary critic, bares itself as disguised human trafficking; carbon is constitutive of the human body, the second most widely available element, after oxygen, in humans. Just like our conceptions of time should be intrinsically connected to our conceptions of waste, so too should our conceptions of narrative be inflected now with transnational, long term, futurisms. This is the great adventure that awaits Irish Studies.