

The clash of crisis narratives

In general terms, my other paper argues that crisis narratives are often effective. They represent one discursive move in the contestation of policy debates.

The debt crisis, for example, is effective insofar as it can force those political actors resisting austerity onto the back-foot. To the extent that “show us the money” becomes a compelling counter to their proposed policies.

Crisis narratives, I argue, play with, perpetuate and provoke an existential sense of anxiety and unease – they act with anti-democratic tendencies by suppressing dissent. Such dissenting voices start to self-identify as advocating unaffordable luxuries, as having their heads in the sand, as being out of touch with brutal reality.

The governmentality of unease: governments and markets exercising power over citizens by stressing the dangers and anxieties that open up in the move to neo-liberalism, moving citizens towards an ethos of self-responsibility by asking them to manage their own anxieties; bolstering the legitimacy of those who are able to design and implement the necessary strategic response.

The assumption in all of this that crisis narratives and the ‘governmentality of unease’ are effective: that they do political work; that they suppress dissent.

But, from Bourdieu, not all speech acts are created equal. The crucial question of who is performing the narrative, from what position of relative power, possessing what sort of capital.

To further explore this question of the efficacy of crisis narratives, planning to explore here an instance where two competing crisis narratives collide: the narrative of environmental crisis (exemplified in the challenge of climate change) and the ongoing, pervasive crisis of economic competitiveness in a hostile global economy.

(Either before or after this point: noting the normative dimension of crisis narratives. Provisional conclusion that they are normatively dubious for their anti-democratic tendency; but the pragmatic argument that they may be necessary (the only way) to get meaningful action on pressing issues (e.g. climate change) – this opening up into bigger issues: (a) should we assess the desirability of crisis narratives on substantive or procedural grounds; (b) how do we assess the ontological status of crises? (i.e. to which criteria of measurement should we look? How do we decide whether a crisis is “real” or politically constructed?)

Environmental crisis narratives

The story we all know. Either narrated as (1) a ‘doom and gloom’ story of the end of the world, or as (2) a story of the challenges it may pose to New Zealand. It’s structural vulnerability on either count: (1) If it’s that serious then there’s nothing that New Zealand can do, us being so small and insignificant; (2) any meaningful response may bring its own challenges to (c.f. NZ Institute report, which notes the greater challenge to NZ of ‘indirect’ effects of climate change)

The limitations of the environmental crisis narrative

Yet these powerful crisis narratives have not translated into concerted efforts, at either the international or (the focus here) the national level in New Zealand. Instead of the concerted effort promised in 2005 by Helen Clark to make New Zealand a beacon of hope, to make environmental sustainability a pillar of our national identity.

A series of compromises – agriculture, for e.g., exempted from the ETS until dates that have been consistently pushed back

Why so limited?

Focus on the costs of compliance rather than the financial benefits of leadership.

The conflicting crisis of economic competitiveness

Short termism – our agricultural exports are necessary to everyday economic viability.