

# How an ecosystem of stories can play a role in the transition to a low carbon future

Noam Bergman, U of Sussex

Katy Janda, UCL

# The importance of stories

**Stories** are among the oldest form of human communication. Stories play an important cultural role; they help create shared beliefs, purposes and norms throughout human history.

**Narratives** are more formal than stories. A narrative is a constructed story, portrayed as non-fiction, which shows development from problem emergence to resolution.

Narratives can be powerful rhetorical tools, as they can present one vision of reality by obscuring large portions of that reality.

A **dominant narrative** is a story that society tells itself; a paradigm that we are socialised into. *“We internalize narrative as ideology, a story told by people in power.”*

Merchant 2004. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. Routledge.

***Future visions, scenarios, projections are narratives***

# The dominant narrative

The current dominant narrative of ‘**modern economic growth**’ centres on technology, progress and modernity, beginning with the industrial revolution.

It portrays the only (positive) future as similar to the present, with technology solving our problems. This approach tends to minimise systemic change, and can therefore benefit powerful incumbents.

Barca (2011) argues that this narrative “*systematically silences environmental and social costs and the global inequalities incorporated into current energy regimes*”.

# Is it fit for purpose?

Given current challenges, such as climate change, we might (re)consider what stories and narratives we hold onto, and whether the modern economic growth narrative is fit for purpose.

This narrative narrows our options for the future, marginalising other stories and visions, potentially leaving us unprepared or underprepared for current challenges.

It limits our response to the environmental challenges to ‘**green growth**’ and often narrows sustainability to GHG emissions.

COVID-19 highlighted deep global inequalities and it exposed how our system has **fragile efficiency** rather than **resilience**.

# Stories are multiple

We suggest that **no one narrative is enough** to prepare us for the all the challenges the present and future hold.

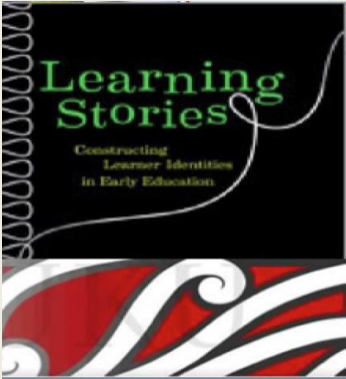
Our scenarios, projections and other future visions need require **multiple stories**, perspectives, and agencies.

The UN's **Sustainable Development Goals** are an example of this. They have different focuses that support a series of different visions, rather than one overarching imagined future. There are even tensions between the goals.

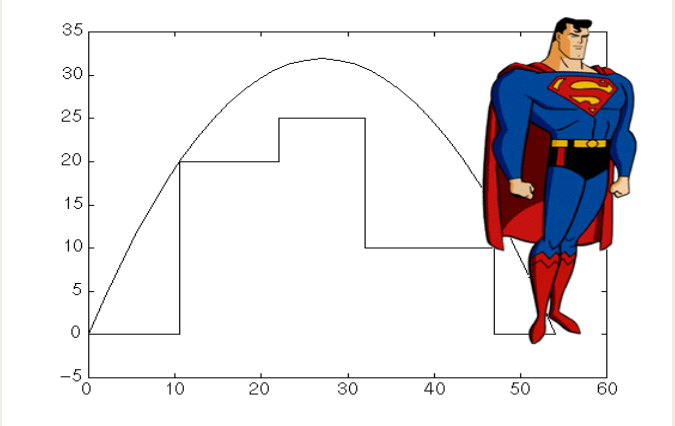
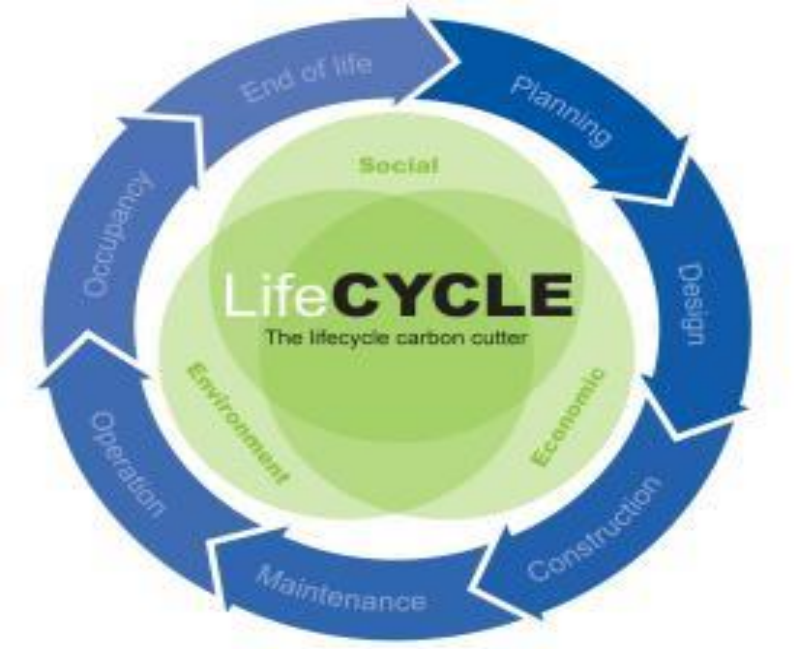
# System of Stories: Hero, Learning, Caring



Caring Stories



Learning Stories



Hero story



Horror story

Janda, K. B., & M. Topouzi. 2015. "Telling tales: using stories to remake energy policy." *Building Research & Information* 43 (4):516-533. DOI: 10.1080/09613218.2015.1020217.

# Conclusions from the system of stories

- The dominant economic narrative is a **hero story**, with technology as the hero.
- Whether we believe in ‘toppling’ the modern economic growth narratives or ‘complementing’ it, we need multiple stories to address our current challenges.
- Hero stories are not enough, we need caring and learning stories, and perhaps ‘horror stories’ as cautionary tales.

# Ecosystem of stories: A useful metaphor?

We could see the multiplicity of stories as an ecosystem:

- Stories co-exist, compete, or even consume each other
- A dominant narrative could be seen as an ‘apex predator’
- Ecosystems change over time in response to perturbations and external shocks
- Stories evolve to stay relevant. For example, the evolution of the **green growth** narrative in response to climate change, which changed the story ecosystem.



# Apex predator or green desert?

Orthodox economics is central to the modern economic growth paradigm. Economics is “unique among the social sciences in having a single monolithic mainstream, which is either unaware of or actively hostile to alternative approaches”. King (2013)

This suggests active pursuit of a single story; reproduction of dominant narrative.

- **Apex predator**, actively preying on other stories.
- **Green desert**, an agricultural monoculture, grown to maximise yield and profit; however, it is not resilient in the face of shocks.

# Reaction to shock

External shocks such can generate windows of opportunity for new narratives and significant policy development.

This has been studied for the economic crisis 2007-2009

**COVID-19** has also been a game-changer. Incredible disruptions were undertaken to fight the pandemic; our lives were rearranged, a new sense of 'normal' emerged.

What opportunities for change might there be?

# COVID-19 opportunity?

A **window of opportunity** early in the pandemic – glimpses of a different world, another way of life (quiet roads, clear air)

Now we see a struggle between return to ‘life as normal’ and social change – mirroring the main reactions to climate change.

COVID challenged the economic status quo; it has highlighted inequalities; it has shown how our system has **fragile efficiency** rather than **resilience**.

Heterodox economics provides relevant criticism, e.g.:

*“In the coming months and years, there will be a battle to define the narrative of the pandemic. ... A fundamental change in the prevailing economic narrative is necessary for a more just, robust, and democratic society”*. (Alves & Kvangraven)

# Final thoughts...

- Considering a variety of narratives can broaden the basis for policies to cope with our greatest challenges: climate change, environmental crises and recovery from the pandemic
- There are interdisciplinary opportunities to partner energy system research with metaphors of the natural world
- Understanding social and economic systems can learn from life sciences, e.g. food webs.
- Arts and humanities, which look at storytelling, can give us a fresh perspective.

# Further information...

Forthcoming book chapter:

**Bergman, N. & K. B. Janda**, *How stories of the future impact energy and climate policy in the present*, in *Research Handbook on Energy and Society*, J. Webb, M. Tingey & Faye Wade (eds.), UK. Edward Elgar Publishing

Forthcoming paper:

**Bergman, N. & K. B. Janda**, Recasting Stories about Energy in a Post-Pandemic World. eceee *Summer Stury conference proceedings 2021*.

Building on previous work about using stories in research: ERSS special issue

**Moezzi, M., K. B. Janda, & S. Rotmann**, eds. 2017. *Narratives and Storytelling in Energy and Climate Change Research*. Vol. 31, *Special Issue of Energy Research and Social Science*.

- **Moezzi, M., K. B. Janda, & S. Rotmann**, 2017. "Using stories, narratives and storytelling in energy & climate change research " *Energy Research & Social Science* 31:1-10.