

Connecting our analysis to create alliances: opportunities for action arising from neoliberalism's joint challenge to communities and our environment

Paper delivered to the Sociological Association of Ireland Postgraduate Conference, 7 March 2014.

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Abstract

This paper argues that neoliberalism, as a common threat for social justice and environmental concerns, can create mutual consensus for political action across diverse interest groups. The paper highlights neoliberal trends towards the commodification of community and the marketisation of the environment. It identifies three characteristics of commercialisation, depoliticisation and consumption. The paper finds that many proposed solutions remain within the neoliberal paradigm and seek to capitalise on the crisis rather than provide for transformative social change. It therefore explores how counter-hegemonic solutions might be developed through effective alliances between community development and the environmental movement. It maps out the diverse spaces where consensus for political action might be achieved, highlighting examples in marginalised and pollution affected communities, communities promoting sustainability and communities resisting unsustainability. The paper suggests that processes of dialogue and alliance building can support more effective engagement between community development and environmentalism. This paper has implications for how the social professions responds to environmental issues at a time when climate change is increasingly affecting communities with whom they are concerned and with whom they work for social justice.

Key words

Community development, environmental justice, neoliberalism, action research

Introduction

As societies across the globe grapple with the challenges that climate change poses for energy and environmental policy there has been a concurrent explosion of environmental protest. Responding to climate change through decarbonisation, the transition away from fossil fuels, requires states to make significant and controversial resource allocation decisions and public policy choices. In essence, responding to climate change causes us to ask how will society be structured and organised in the future? This paper explores how those working in the social professions, in particular community work, might respond to environmental issues through their practice in order to support the development of equitable and just responses to environmental issues including climate change. This paper offers a synthesis of research carried out as part of a taught, professional MA in Community Work and Youth Work. Community work is an approach to social change underpinned by principles including social justice, participation, empowerment and collective action (CWC, 2009). In Ireland it is practiced in a variety of contexts, including local Community Development Projects and nationally in organisations such as Pavee Point. Community work has been slow to adopt environmental concerns despite the interconnectedness of social and environmental justice struggles and the joint challenge that neoliberalism poses to communities and our environment. In this paper I identify three broad and interconnected characteristics of the neoliberal threat to communities and the environment: commercialisation, depoliticisation and hyper-consumption. I will then map out areas of engagement where consensus for political action might be achieved. Finally, I will suggest that the twin processes of dialogue and alliance building may support effective collaborations for political action between community work and environmentalism. This tentative analysis forms the basis of my doctoral research, which I have been undertaking since October 2013 with assistance from the NUI Maynooth John and Pat Hume Scholarship Fund. The analysis presented here will feed into an action research process with community work practitioners in order to explore how practitioners can make practical climate justice interventions in their

work. Ultimately my research seeks to develop knowledge and practice strategies to support the implementation of effective, equitable and just public policy responses to climate change at a local level using community work methodologies. My action research design is formed around a theoretical framework of participatory practice for social change, informed by key community development theorists including Paulo Freire (1996) and Margaret Ledwith (2007; 2013). It recognises calls within the social sciences for an epistemological paradigm shift from positivism by many including Hilary Bradbury and Peter Reason (2006).

Developing an analysis of neoliberalism's joint challenge to communities and the environment

Paul Randsome (2013) highlights that action research is essentially a process concerned with solving real organisational problems. Returning to the challenge of climate change, and the question of how we organise our society in response to it, my research seeks to find innovative ways to answer that question in local communities but with societal effect. Hilary Moore and Joshua Kahn Russel (2011:14) argue that the challenge of climate change forces us to 'think strategically and act structurally'. With that call in mind this paper begins by developing an interconnected analysis which seeks to connect diverse community work and environmental concerns through an analysis of neoliberalism's joint challenge to both. My MA research developed a preliminary analysis of the challenge which neoliberalism poses to communities and the environment, which will be fed into the action research process of the doctorate.

The first characteristic of the challenge of neoliberalism for communities and the environment is commercialisation. If you have ever been to a Starbucks coffee shop you might have noticed the attention put into cultivating a sense that each Starbucks is part of the community. Starbucks' strategy is to inculcate the brand into the social fabric of our worlds. Andy Storey (2011:37) highlights the increasing reality that unless something has a market price, it has no value at all. With this in mind, Starbucks appeals to intrinsic values like

family and community, concern for others and social justice in order to bolster their own profitability. Similarly, our environment is being commodified. Water privatisations, seed patenting and land grabbing are all symptomatic of what Vandana Shiva (2012) calls 'wars against the earth'. Neoliberalism appropriates intrinsic values, transformative concepts and physical spaces of community and sustainability for the profit-driven sphere. This process of commercialisation presents a serious challenge to community and environmental organisations who might seek to employ such concepts in the promotion of social and environmental justice.

The second characteristic of neoliberalism's threat to communities and the environment which I identify is the depoliticisation of transformative concepts. As ideas like social justice or fair trade are appropriated in the drive for profit, they are also employed to give a veneer of participation to top-down impositions on our communities. This so called "empowerment" of communities by top-down regulation involves a process 'whereby the state [...] offloads its responsibilities onto those shoulders that are willing to bear them for nothing' . Ira Shor (2011:viii-ix) notes that this process takes place 'without any understanding that the poorest communities with the least resources will be faced with the biggest responsibilities' (Margaret Ledwith, 2011:1) . In Ireland the local government reform process is placing community work under local government control, eliminating much of independent civil society at local level (CWC, 2013). Reforms are reducing the potential for collective analysis and action, negating a structural analysis of the crisis and placing the burden of response on individuals and voluntary organisations. With environmental issues, community participation processes are often tokenistic, aimed at gaining political legitimacy for planning decisions already taken. Both community work and the environmentalism seek to challenge power structures that place the burden of social, economic and environmental injustices on the most vulnerable. The depoliticisation of transformative concepts is a common threat for social and environmental justice as the state increasingly allows only *active citizenship*, rather than collective action with a critical analysis that could challenge neoliberal hegemony.

The third characteristic of the neoliberal threat which I identify is hyper-consumption. The discourse of neoliberalism encourages us to believe that this is the age of the consumer, and every sensible person is enjoying or desiring constant consumption. The drive to create “new markets” and strive for a “growth economy” are premised on the false notion that it is possible to expand and consume infinitely on a planet with only finite resources (Tim Jackson, 2009). Globalised hyper-consumption precludes the development of alternative, sustainable local and regional economies which would be able to respond with resilience to the effects of climate change. As ecological and economic crises converge, the threat to the so called ‘triple bottom line’ (Mark Hillman, 2002) of sustainability (social, economic and environmental justice) is propelled and exasperated by our hyper consumption. Mark Bhatti (2001) notes a further injustice in how ‘our ability to alleviate, mitigate or even escape [...] ecological deterioration is dependent on how much income we have, where we live, which class we belong to and whether we suffer discrimination in other areas of our lives’.

Exploring common spaces for consensus and action to challenge neoliberalism

I have set out commercialisation, depoliticisation and hyper-consumption as characteristics of a neoliberal hegemony that provide an analytical framework which link the issues of community work and environmentalism. Once again it is important to note that my research is rooted in a structural analysis of poverty and inequality and directed towards practical action (Hilary Bradbury and Peter Reason, 2006:2). Emerging from this analytical framework I have therefore identified three common spaces where mutual consensus and action between community work and environmentalism may be possible:

- Marginalised and pollution affected communities;
- Communities promoting sustainability; and
- Communities resisting unsustainability.

Using these categories I will explore how the concept of environmental justice can be seen as uniting the concerns of community work and environmentalism. Environmental justice

takes a social justice and equality approach to environmental issues and is therefore concerned with three general principles:

1. Recognising that the effects of pollution and unsustainability are most felt by marginalised communities who have least access to resources and power;
2. Acknowledging and addressing how gender, 'race' and economic inequalities aggravate the effects of pollution and unsustainability;
3. Supporting marginalised communities to reclaim the debate on environmental issues and participate in decisions which affect them.

Marginalised and pollution affected communities

The Community Workers' Co-operative note that marginalised communities have 'have historically borne the brunt of social and environmental injustice' (Ann Irwin and Kevin Murphy, 2012). Poor housing and Traveller halting site conditions (Pavee Point, 2011), high levels of litter and dumping in council estates and rising fuel and food costs are all environmental injustices. Indeed, many marginalised urban communities continue to experience a poor quality environment after the financial crisis destroyed hopes of regeneration. Urban community consultation on their local environment often fails to recognise community rights, as illustrated by the ongoing struggle of the St. Michael's Estate community (John Bisset, 2008). As the State plans its response to climate change, with legislation currently before the Oireachtas, environmental justice could provide a framework for the just transition to a 'low carbon economy'. However it is increasingly unlikely that the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill will provide for ambitious, equitable and legally binding greenhouse gas emissions targets that would provide a legal basis for a just energy transition. Aside from climate policy, an environmental justice approach to public policy making may be able to produce challenges to the State's neoliberalism. The privatisation of public services, council housing and public space all result in communities experiencing more environmental costs and having less power to challenge injustice.

Michael Punch (2009) and John Bisset (2008) provide accounts of the praxis developed by local residents in partnerships with community workers and academics in Dublin City Council regeneration projects. They highlight how community work brought marginalised voices into the debate on city development, allowing them to challenge neoliberal policies. Generations of marginalisation shaped their identity and made the communities “experts by experience” on their own built environment and community needs. By recognising this “People’s History” and using it to support the community to develop its own analysis, the community work responses were deeply enriched and vastly more effective. This embodiment of an environmental justice approach, using a community work methodology, supported the communities to become sites of resistance to the hegemony of neoliberalism.

Communities promoting sustainability and resilience

The second space where opportunities for mutual action between community development and the green movement arises is with communities promoting sustainability and resilience. Many communities are developing initiatives such as community gardens, food and energy co-operatives and joining the Transition Towns movement, which seeks to eliminate dependency on fossil fuels. These movements towards sustainability are “prefigurative spaces”; microcosms of a sustainable and just world. However it is clear that not every community is in a position to take these steps. For example, while some marginalised communities have made community gardens for growing food, other solutions such as energy co-operatives remain available to a privileged minority. The environmental justice challenge for community work and policy makers is to continue to find innovative ways for marginalised communities to benefit from these movements towards sustainability.

Community resilience may be a useful concept for challenging unsustainability and supporting participation, collective action and empowerment. Nick Wilding (2011: 4) defines resilience as ‘the ability to respond constructively to the unknown - to the shocks that come upon us in society [...] from anywhere’. Many activities like Transition Towns and community

gardening can be seen as efforts to improve community resilience. Yet building resilience, or engaging in lifestyle changes such as recycling will at best have the effect of “[mobilising] people to produce at the margins’ (James Petras, 1997) of neoliberal capitalism in a form of communitarian self-help. To be transformative, and to challenge hegemonic neoliberalism, these prefigurative movements towards sustainability must support the generation of a critical analysis and collective action for political change on a systemic level.

Communities resisting unsustainability

The third space for mutual action, and the one that is most visible in public debate, is in communities resisting unsustainability. Often communities only begin to think about environmental justice and sustainable development when they become the location of unsustainable projects which have harmful social and environmental consequences, such as incinerators, dumps and mining or drilling sites. The media often vilifies these communities, labelling them NIMBYs, meaning ‘not in my backyard’. Yet this denies the reality that communities have a right to participate in decisions which affect their local environment and ignores the moral right, now given legal basis in the Aarhus Convention, of those who will be more seriously affected by any decision to have a greater input into the decision-making. These communities become involuntary sites of resistance to unsustainable projects that have the potential to cause large scale social and environmental injustices for the whole population. In other words, they are challenging systemic unsustainability on the behalf of society. Out of necessity they develop their own lived analysis of the hegemonic structures perpetuating unsustainability and they can present real challenges to politicians’ and policy makers’ control of the discourse. The issue of drilling for shale gas in a process known as fracking offers an excellent example of this. The anti-fracking mobilisation in Ireland has spawned over twenty groups across the island and is an interesting example to understand the phenomenon of collective action. Despite the huge negative effects of austerity on communities across the island we have not seen the sort of mass action on austerity that has been brought about by fracking. This is surprising given the interconnectedness of the

State's neoliberal social, economic and environmental policies. It points to the importance of communities who have become sites of resistance as places where real counter-hegemonic analysis could be developed, leading to action for transformative change.

Dialogue and alliance-building to support environmental justice

I have illustrated how commercialisation, depoliticisation and hyper-consumption present a common challenge to communities and the environment, and that arising from this joint challenge there are common spaces for consensus and action, where specific neoliberal State policies impact on community and environment in both urban and rural contexts. In my final minutes I will offer some thoughts on how the twin processes of dialogue and alliance building might be used as practice strategies for community work to support opportunities for collaboration with environmentalism. This paper has highlighted how voluntary social action and lifestyle environmentalism such as reducing individual consumption are often promoted as solutions without a structural analysis of oppression which supports collective and strategic action. Community work is rooted in the transformative concepts of the educationalist Paulo Freire (1996) and may therefore be in a unique position to support dialogue that could challenge the individualising discourse of neoliberalism and support effective local action on environmental issues and climate change. In the anti-fracking campaign, processes of information sharing and sense making through meetings, the arts and local media are being used to engage the community in dialogue. Anti-fracking campaigners are developing knowledge in praxis through the campaigns and local communities are becoming the experts on the very issues which affect them. These spaces for community dialogue are very important in creating the conditions for societal change on the scale called for by climate change. Peter Westoby and Gerard Dowling (2009: 187) highlight that

'rather than [...] disseminating more information [on climate change or environmental issues], community workers have the skills to make a

critical contribution by opening up new conversations infused with the practice of dialogue, creating spaces and platforms for ordinary people to reveal their fears, come to terms with their doubts and gradually embrace alternatives.’

Moving forward in my research I will explore the transformative potential of community dialogue in supporting the implementation of solutions to climate change. Building on dialogue, the process of alliance building may be useful in scaling up the conversation. Broad coalitions which bring together communities and organisations across a range of issues may provide more effective advocacy platforms that can engage with the multi-dimensional challenges of climate change. By rooting alliances in the lived realities of communities facing poverty, inequality and environmental degradation a tangible link can be made between the neoliberal policies which are at the heart of the social and environmental injustices; helping to make the challenge of climate change real for ordinary people. In my doctoral research I will explore how the process of alliance building can be used as a practice strategy in the community work response to climate change. By combining dialogue and alliance building I will examine the potential to link the personal and the political and challenge hierarchical boundaries between communities and institutional policy-makers. In this way, I posture that “active citizens” could be replaced by agents of social change. Potential alliances need to be both horizontal (with local communities and organisations linking) and vertical (local communities, national and international organisations linking). The Stop Climate Chaos coalition brings together environmental, faith-based and international development organisations. Local and national community development organisations can join this coalition which advocates on national climate change policy. Other Potential collaborations might include community development engaging with fracking campaigning groups, local authority energy agencies, community energy projects and the Transition Towns movement. These opportunities for collaboration will be explored further in future research.

Conclusion: Connecting the dots

Returning, in conclusion, to the need to 'think structurally and act strategically' in the face of the climate crisis, this paper has explored how those working in the social professions might respond to environmental issues through their practice in order to support the development of equitable and just responses to climate change. Beginning with the development of an analysis which linked neoliberalism's challenge to community and the environment through the characteristics of commercialisation, depoliticisation and hyper-consumption, I explored some common spaces for consensus and action rooted in the concept of environmental justice. These spaces were marginalised and pollution affected communities, communities promoting sustainability and communities promoting sustainability. With these spaces I have shown how neoliberal policies intersect in practice and how, therefore, a connected analysis may provide opportunities for action arising from neoliberalism's joint challenge to communities and the environment. I suggest that the twin processes of dialogue and alliance building may provide useful practice strategies for counter-hegemonic action that could be used by community work to support the development public policy that promotes just and equitable solutions to climate change. Or in other words, to provide some answers to that pressing question of climate change: how will society be structured and organised in the future?

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