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**Stories of resistance and resilience: developing a community work approach
to climate change and climate justice**

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Abstract

How can a radical community work approach begin to address the climate crisis? Climate change poses an enormous threat to social justice and is already detrimentally affecting the lives of millions of the most marginalised people around the world. In this paper, I critically assess the December 2015 Paris Agreement reached at the UN climate conference using the elements of environmental justice theory: recognition, redistribution and participation. I suggest that the solutions proposed by the agreement lack ambition and equity, instead relying on technological quick-fixes and financial markets. I trace the root cause of the climate crisis in Enlightenment humanist philosophies that contribute to what bell hooks has called patriarchal, white supremacist capitalism and a mechanistic exploitation of people and the planet. Finally, drawing on my experience carrying out community work research in north-west Ireland, I explore how a popular education approach offers tools for a radical community work response to climate change that is rooted in dialogue that supports us to tell new stories and create alternative, sustainable and participatory ways of being.

The fight for climate justice

On 12 December 2015 in Paris, as the UN climate conference came to a close, I found myself with thousands of people gathered on the Avenue de Champs-Élysées. The street was a riot of colour. Many people dressed in red, symbolising their “red line” demands for food sovereignty, gender equality, indigenous rights and the many intersecting issues that are affected by the climate crisis (Zeese and Flowers, 2015). Many of the groups who took to the streets were united by the concept of climate justice, which highlights the questions of social justice (Levy and Patz, 2015), gender equality (Nampinga, 2008; Terry, 2009), human rights (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015) and indigenous peoples’ rights (Baird, 2008) inherent in climate change. Climate justice frames climate change within a social analysis and highlights how it is embedded in and exasperated by social structures of inequality and oppression (Moore and Russel, 2011: 15-23). The media narrative around the Paris Agreement claimed the deal was “historic” (The Times of India, 2015) and “landmark” (New York Times, 2015), but benchmarked against the principles of climate justice- as I will illustrate in this article- it is clear that the agreement lacks equity and continues to rely on false market-based solutions and technological quick fixes. George Monbiot’s (2015) astute observation summed up the politics of the negotiations, noting that

by comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it’s a disaster. The talks in Paris are the best there have ever been. And that is a terrible indictment.

Given this reality, the movements on the streets of Paris were there to say that the fight for climate justice will continue, in our communities and in solidarity with each other. Many groups were already looking to 2016 and making plans to take non-violent direct action to resist the construction and continued use of fossil fuel infrastructure such as the Key Stone XL pipeline which is having a serious negative impact on Indigenous Peoples’ land and

rights in Canada. Indeed, Tom Goldtooth (2015) of the Indigenous Environmental Network made it clear that 'Indigenous Peoples are the redline. We have drawn that line with our bodies against the privatisation of nature, to dirty fossil fuels and to climate change.'

As I write I have returned to the rural north-west of Ireland, where I am working on a community development PhD project with communities who are engaging in the twin practices of resistance and resilience. Many groups here are successfully resisting the unconventional gas drilling process known as 'fracking', with all its associated social and environmental risks (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2012). And while no drilling has yet taken place, many others are exploring ways to build resilience with local energy and food systems. The many movements that converged for a moment on Paris have returned to communities around the world, and I ask myself what the fight for climate justice means for communities like those here in the north-west of Ireland. In the Global North climate justice demands in particular a rapid transition to renewable energy and an end to our consumption of fossil fuels (Hopkins, 2008). How can community work begin to address the global issue of climate change from a justice perspective in local communities? This article is both an exercise in reflective practice for me as a practitioner (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) and a contribution to the conversation on how community work practice can respond to the climate crisis- an invitation to dialogue as we move forward from Paris in the fight for climate justice. In writing I must also acknowledge that I do so as a community worker in the Global North and cannot pretend to speak on the very real challenges for community work in the South posed by climate change.

Noting the importance for some of the concept of 'climate justice'

The UN climate change negotiations took place in a converted private airport in the Parisian suburb of Le Bourget. Despite having an area for public information and debate known as the Climate Generations Space, the conference complex was far removed from

local social justice issues in the *banlieues* of Paris, and another world away from the realities of those in the South facing the worst affects of climate change. Delegates and observers travelled to the conference from special shuttle collection points, where buses brought them to the airport complex, guarded by heavily armed military police and requiring airport style security checks to enter even the public areas. The tense security situation in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks saw the French government enact a state of emergency which they used to place many climate activists under house arrest and to ban demonstrations (The Guardian, 2015). This context further exasperated the barriers to participation for movements of marginalised groups, particularly those from the South who faced deportation for taking part in 'unauthorised' demonstrations.

The little participatory spaces that existed for civil society at the conference have been criticised as a tokenistic moment of

false inclusion that, like the final agreement concluded in Paris, noticed the existence of alternative paradigms but was fully embedded in and constructed around the reproduction of the dominant rhetoric about climate change (Ferrando, 2016).

Community workers will perhaps be no strangers to such moments of false inclusion for communities dealing with bureaucratic structures. Indeed, the final text of the agreement merely noted in the non-binding preamble 'the importance for some of the concept of "climate justice" when taking action to address climate change' (United Nations, 2015), essentially belittling and dismissing the needs and demands of those most affected by climate change. Pollution and environmental degradation are often felt most severely by marginalised communities with the least access to resources and climate change follows this pattern of unequal distribution of burden on a global scale (Walker, 2012). The injustice inherent in climate change is that those countries and communities who have done least to cause the problem will be worst affected and have the least capacity to adapt (Althor *et al*, 2016; Page,

2008). At the same time, those who bear the greatest historic responsibility for climate change, the industrialised countries of the Global North, have far greater resources to adapt (Ringus *et al*, 2002). Globally, a justice based response to climate change has three broad elements which are rooted in both social and environmental justice theory: recognition, redistribution and participation (Frasier & Honneth, 2003; Schlosberg, 2007). These three elements provide a framework to assess the Paris Agreement from a justice perspective.

Assessing the Paris Agreement

Redistribution

Environmental Justice theory conceptualises redistribution as the fair and equitable distribution of benefits and burdens (Walker, 2012). In responding to climate change at a global level such a redistributive approach means treating the atmosphere as a common resource, and acknowledging that industrialised countries have used more than their fair share of it (Agarwal and Narain, 1991). Climate justice activists and theory therefore suggests that the industrialised North owes an 'ecological debt' to the countries of the South (Healy *et al*, 2013; Peralta, 2007). The concept of ecological debt highlights the 'plunder of resources and also [...] the occupation of disproportionate environmental space by the rich countries' who are, for example, depositing excessive amounts of carbon dioxide in the oceans and the atmosphere (Martinez-Alier *et al*, 2016: 744). To address this inequity, industrialised countries must act first and fastest in making deep cuts to fossil fuel emissions, known in UN parlance as "mitigation", transitioning to "decarbonised" societies based on renewable energies. Redistribution also calls for the transfer of renewable energy technologies, as well as providing finance and capacity building from North to South to support states with fewer resources to make the transition away from fossil fuels (The People's Test on Climate, 2015).

These questions of redistribution were given a legal footing by the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (United Nations, 1992) as the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility”, abbreviated to CBDR in the negotiations (Bell, 2012). Annex II of the 1992 convention provided a list of the industrialised countries which were singled out as having historic responsibility and greater resources to act. While the CBDR principle remains in the framework convention, and forms the basis of 1997’s Kyoto Protocol (United Nations, 1997), it has been systematically undermined by industrialised countries beginning with 2009’s Copenhagen Accord (United Nations, 2009). Arguments centred particularly on the fact that current big polluters such as China and India were left off the Annex II list in 1992, and that this list did not reflect the scale of modern emissions from these countries. While it is true that China and India are major polluters today, this argument obscures the Global North’s historic responsibility and further fails to distinguish between the emerging industrial economies and other Southern states including the Least Developed Countries (Meyer & Roser, 2010).

The CBDR principle has effectively been sidelined in the Paris Agreement, which acknowledges it but fails to provide for its operationalisation. Instead of legally requiring industrialised states to make deep and immediate emissions reductions in line with their fair share, the Paris Agreement invites every state to make voluntary mitigation pledges (Savaresi; 2016: 21-2). The only binding mitigation clause in the agreement is that states are legally required to report their voluntary and non binding emissions reduction efforts, known as “Nationally Determined Contributions”. This has left the agreement with a significant gap between rhetoric and action. Article two of the deal commits to

holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change (United Nations, 2015)

However once the maths has been done on the Nationally Determined Contributions made by states, it is clear that we remain on course for between 2.7°C to 3.7°C warming (Climate Action Tracker, 2015; Levin and Fransen, 2015) The agreement calls for a ramping up of pledges and commits to a “stocktaking dialogue” in 2018, but nevertheless the agreement has been criticised for a lack of ambition and clarity (Chivers and Worth, 2015; Friends of the Earth International, 2015; Raman, 2016). Similarly, other key questions of redistribution - technology transfer, climate finance and capacity building - have been left unclear and on a voluntary footing (Raman, 2016). The reality is that questions of redistribution have been extremely thorny as they fundamentally ask who is responsible for climate change and who needs to pay the bill? The answer that has been arrived at in Paris is essentially “everyone pay what they can”, which is a significant victory for the US, EU and other industrialised countries who have successfully blocked Southern states’ efforts to hold them legally accountable for the climate crisis.

Recognition

The second key element of climate justice is the recognition of how diverse identities and experiences mean that the effects of climate change are felt differently by different groups. Climate change requires an intersectional analysis which recognises that it will disproportionately affect those already facing inequalities and oppressions including those formed around class, ‘race’/ethnicity, gender and geography (Terry, 2009). A gender analysis highlights how women, as primary caregivers in societies with patriarchal and gendered divisions of labour will be disproportionately affected by changing climatic conditions (Dankelman, 2010; Denton, 2002; Hemmati and Röhr, 2009; Röhr *et al*, 2008). Fuel poverty (Liddell and Morris, 2010; Walker and Day, 2012) and food poverty (Agyeman and Alkon, 2011), for example, are significant issues where a gender analysis gender analysis (Sachs, 2013). A ‘race’/ethnicity lens highlights the need for specific protection of indigenous people’s rights (Mantyka-Pringle *et al*, 2015) as well as a structural analysis of how racism already places some groups at the brunt of environmental burdens while limiting

their access to a good quality environment (Takei, 2016). This 'environmental racism' has been particularly highlighted in the US (Bullard, 1994), but is also an issue for minorities in Europe, including Travellers, Roma and Sinti (Harper, Steger & Filcak, 2009). A class analysis of climate change reminds us that there is a need to plan for a "just transition" away from fossil fuels (Evans and Phelan, 2016). How are we ensuring that renewable energies, organic local food and sustainable building materials are available to all groups and communities, particularly those living in poverty? The concept of a just transition also requires ensuring that workers in the coal, oil and gas industries, and the communities that rely on them are, are supported to replace fossil fuel jobs with decent work (International Labour Organisation, 2010; Stevis and Felli, 2015). Despite a long battle during the negotiations to maintain specific commitments for gender equality, indigenous rights, workers' rights and human rights more broadly, the final draft of Paris agreement (United Nations, 2015) relegates all questions of recognition to the non binding preamble.

Participation

Finally, and interrelated to recognition and redistribution, climate justice requires the participation of those who are directly affected by the climate crisis in efforts to address it (Schlosberg, 2007). Participation involves the removal of barriers to decision making for marginalised groups and communities which in themselves can often be a result of unfair distributions of resources, knowledge and power as well as a lack of recognition of diverse identities (AIEB, 2015). Supporting participation therefore requires an intersectional analysis that supports solidarity and seeks to address barriers and support an equality of outcome for all (Chatterton *et al* 2013). This conversation has begun within the climate movement itself, with strategic convergences and alliances amongst diverse groups affected by the climate crisis (Tramel 2016). However the false inclusion of Paris, rather than providing for meaningful participation of marginalised groups, served to legitimise market based solutions such as carbon trading (Böhm, 2015; Spash, 2016) and the UN REDD+ scheme, meaning

“Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation”. This scheme works to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forests and has been heavily criticised by land rights activists and indigenous groups for facilitating landgrabbing and the development of carbon markets that allow pollution to continue (Friends of the Earth International, 2014).

These “market mechanisms” which provide for financial speculation on nature itself fail to break out of the exploitative economic thinking that created the crisis, and instead ‘can be seen as perpetuating a system which has created both huge inequalities and sustained environmental damage (Barugh and Glass, 2010:2). The reality is that the narrative of the Paris Agreement simply does not envisage a world without fossil fuels. Instead it imagines a world of ‘climate capitalism’ (Kirby, 2014) in which technology and the market can innovate in order to provide “net zero” emissions where the burning of fossil fuels can be balanced by the removal of carbon from the atmosphere with technologies that have not yet been invented (Morgen, 2016). This is a vision of the world that does not challenge the status quo of massive power and wealth inequalities and instead reinforces the hegemony of “green” capitalism (Splash, 2016).

Leaving Paris, I was acutely aware that that the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities who will be most affected by climate change have very little influence on this global political process. The Paris Agreement “notes” their concerns but fails to them seriously because doing so would require thinking outside dominant paradigm of capitalism. The dominant narrative simply writes out dissent and ignores inequality. I found myself asking how I could begin to address this in my practice as a community worker. How can community work support help us to tell a different story- one that is rooted in justice and places the voices and concerns of those most affected front and centre? Theorists like Paulo Friere (1993) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) can point us in the direction of a starting point rooted in dialogue- questioning the things that we have taken as common sense. But the unprecedented scale of climate change call for us to imagine new ways of applying these ideas to support an urgent societal transformation in the way we relate to each other and the

world. It begins with questioning the assumptions and ideas at the very foundations of our societies.

Problematising the Enlightenment “grand narrative”

The Enlightenment is the name given to the philosophical, political and scientific revolution which took place in Europe during the eighteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers broke away from old feudal ways of thinking about the world, society and the self. Leading thinkers including Locke and Descartes developed a philosophy known as humanism, which placed humanity at the centre of the world and above nature itself (Jenkins, 2002). While it brought huge innovation across science and the arts, it was problematic for two reasons. Firstly, humanistic thought was enmeshed in eighteenth century discourses of power and oppression and promoted an ideal of humanity that was white, European, male and bourgeois. It promoted the rights of individual men, and invariably not women, people of colour or the working classes (Hill Collins, 1990). Secondly, by setting human beings aside from nature, humanism broke our intrinsic interdependence with the natural world and suggested that humanity should exploit nature for its own ends. This is what is known as the “grand narrative” of the Enlightenment: an idea of human beings and our place in nature which is so taken for granted in the Global North that it masks the reality that this idea is simply a story we have told ourselves, and even then for little more than two hundred years.

The ideas of the Enlightenment grand narrative remain at the core of modern world and at the root of many of the issues which community work seeks to address including racism, gender inequality and unequal distributions of resources and power. It has allowed for a mechanistic exploitation of people and the planet by what bell hooks (1989) has succinctly summarised as the intersecting oppressions of ‘patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalism’. Feminist activists and scholars have been particularly critical of Enlightenment thinking as privileging competitive, individualistic, exploitative and non-participatory ways of

being in the world (Bryson, 2003: 233-39) At the same time, it has encouraged us to treat the earth as a resource to be exploited. The industrial revolution was driven by the widespread use of coal, a fuel which freed the industrialising states from the constraints of nature: ships no longer needed to wait for the wind to blow, factories no longer needed a water source to power a water wheel. The model of development that emerged was based on the absurd and dangerous idea of endless economic growth, driven by extracting the resources of a finite planet (Douthwaite, 1999).

Anthropocentric (human induced) climate change is a consequence of this historical model of development based exploitation of people and our planet. It is caused primarily by the historic consumption of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) in the industrialised centres of Europe and North America since the late eighteenth century (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014). It is further exasperated by the adoption of a high-intensity industrial agriculture model (International Commission for the Future of Food and Agriculture, 2008), again particularly in the Global North, and the global spread of export orientated trade. World trade remains rooted in a carbon intensive extractivist model which primarily draws raw materials from the Global South for finished goods in the North, via middle income centres of production such as China and Bangladesh (Hilary, 2013). While the European empires have been replaced by the neo-colonialism of free trade agreements (Bizzarri, 2013; Goldman, 2005), we are still living within a narrative which promotes an eighteenth century view of humanity, tangling us, as Naomi Klein (2014) says, in the 'braided historical threads of colonialism, coal and capitalism.' Climate change is therefore an issue which is tied up with fundamental assumptions about society and our place within it, particularly in the Global North as the key historic driver of climate change.

Building new narratives of resistance and resilience

Much time and money has been spent exploring how to communicate about climate change in a way that encourages people to act (Corner *et al*, 2015). This has produced some interesting insights, including the “values and frames” communications tools which highlight how communicating about an issue in negative terms can reinforce negative values (Public Interest Research Centre, 2011). For example, a values approach might criticise using energy security arguments to promote action on climate change because it draws on nationalistic values and a sense of fear rather than a positive sense of solidarity. However much of this communications work falls into the category of what Friere called ‘liberation propaganda’ (Friere, 1993:49), offering information and analysis in a non-participatory and non-dialogical way with the assumption that evidenced arguments will ultimately bring about change. The standard communications approach of many environmental organisations has traditionally fallen into this category, including campaigns promoting “greener” lifestyles (Greenpeace, 2016) as well as more strategic policy or political changes (Food and Water Watch, 2016). In much the same way as the Paris Agreement sidelined the discourse of climate justice, such interventions often fail to bring about transformative or systemic change because they are framed outside of the hegemonic discourse and easy to dismiss when ‘critical thought is discouraged in a world that is founded on capitalism’ (Ledwith, 2005:71).

The transformative potential of community work begins with a radical commitment to “starting where people are at”- acknowledging a community’s lived reality as the beginning of a dialogical process. Freire reminds us that the conviction for social change ‘cannot be packaged and sold’ but must be realised by each person, themselves, ‘by means of a totality of reflection and action’ (1993:48-9). Certainly information, analysis and evidenced arguments can be useful, but Westoby and Dowling (2009: 187) highlight that

rather than [...] disseminating more information 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.

In my work in north-west Ireland I am exploring a community development approach to climate justice. However, starting where people are at requires me to engage with the social and economic realities that are meaningful to communities in that part of the world. This means beginning with issues such as rural disadvantage, dereliction and decline. It is an area without a major industrial base and only small scale agriculture. The local economy is peripheral within the wider national economy, and both are heavily susceptible to international trends and indeed shocks (Kirby and Murphy, 2011: 15-22). At the same time, resistance to fracking has been a catalyst for environmental analysis and action as the region has become an involuntary site of resistance to the extraction of shale gas. There are also a growing number of organic farming and eco-tourism projects, as well emerging possibilities for community renewable energy co-operatives. The opportunity for dialogue around climate change begins with fracking and its effects on the local environment, but also extends to questions of the local economy, food, energy and locally appropriate decent jobs.

These questions crystallise around the concept of resilience: the ability of the community 'to hold together and maintain their ability to function in the face of change and shocks from the outside' (Hopkins, 2008: 14). Resilience offers a framework which can draw together and address both local social and economic issues and the global challenge of climate change. Resilience may also pose a challenge to current trends towards neoliberal managerialism and a top-down programmatic approach in community development (Community Work Ireland, 2016). Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" illustrates how the state seeks to exercise control over the body of its populace in the modern state through bureaucratic and managerial processes (Foucault, 1983). Bureaucratic efforts to control community development by setting pre-defined objectives and targets ensures that 'value replaces values' (Peters, 2001:17), preventing the possibility of flexibility and responsiveness that are inherent to resilience. If community work is to be able to respond in the face of change and shocks, including climate related issues such as flooding and migration, the space must be maintained that allows community workers to support processes of critical analysis and collective action that build community resilience.

“Making peace with the Earth”

The failure of the Paris Agreement to adopt a climate justice approach comes as no surprise to the climate justice movement. Indeed many of the activists and movements who came together in Paris during the talks did not focus on what was happening inside Le Bourget, but instead used the moment for movement discussion and debate, to build alliances and strategies. As the fight for climate justice moves forward community work can play an essential role in building the movement and catalysing change at a local level. Focusing on the principles of recognition, redistribution and participation, community workers can support analysis and action on climate change that is rooted in justice for the communities we work with and solidarity with others around the world. Community work can play a particularly valuable role in promoting an intersectional analysis of climate change which recognises that different groups will be affected differently and addresses barriers to the participation of marginalised and disadvantaged communities in decision making and action on climate change.

The climate crisis is an alarm bell which alerts us to the great flaw of the Enlightenment paradigm. It is a worldview that has allowed us to wage war on our planet, unleashing the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) of climate change that is undermining the possibility of realising the very human rights the Enlightenment held forth as the foundations of social justice and equality. As Vandana Shiva (2013) says, we desperately need to make peace with the earth. And to do so, we need to fundamentally re-imagine our relationships to one another, our social structures and our economy. Through processes of dialogue we need to build stories of resistance and resilience that are rooted in a clear climate justice analysis- stories that help us to take collective action to disrupt the common sense of the grand narrative, create a world free from fossil fuels and secure recognition, redistribution and participation.

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