Sheffield Hallam University

A part and yet apart: how third sector visions of carbon reduction are both welcomed and marginalised

DOBSON, Julian <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6164-2707>

Citation:

A part and yet apart: how third sector visions of carbon reduction are both welcomed and marginalised

Julian Dobson[1]

[1]University of Sheffield

Abstract

The role of the third sector in promoting action on carbon reduction is often that of a third party, lobbying and working from the sidelines and occupying 'green niches' (Seyfang, 2010) without direct access to levers of power. This paper examines how visions of low-carbon futures promoted by third sector actors are both integrated and marginalised at a wider institutional scale. Focusing on efforts to encourage environmental sustainability by organisations within three northern English cities, it highlights how a process of 'integrative marginalisation' may be observed, in which radical visions of a low-carbon future are simultaneously embraced and excluded at an institutional scale. Integrative marginalisation displays four salient features: initial welcome and acceptance; relatively small investments of support; the exclusion of substantial changes from mainstream decision-making; and the assertion of institutional priorities that limit potential action. Integrative marginalisation thus raises questions about the conditions required to prompt more fundamental change.

Introduction

Third sector organisations that seek to bring about a more environmentally 'sustainable' society face the dilemma of how to promote changes that fundamentally depend on the actions of others. They may

occupy 'green niches' (Seyfang, 2010) but have limited access to levers of power. They must therefore attempt to influence and modify other actors' behaviour at organisational and institutional scales. An examination of how such influencing attempts fare reveals a process I describe as integrative marginalisation. I define this as the combined welcome and exclusion of the aspirations expressed by third sector organisations (in the case of this paper, aspirations for a low-carbon future).

The notion of integrative marginalisation builds on voluntary sector scholarship examining the 'insider/outsider' relationships between civil society organisations and government (Kendall, 2000; Lune & Oberstein, 2001; O'Regan & Oster, 2002; Craig et al., 2004). This field of inquiry focuses in particular on the role of the voluntary sector vis-a-vis the state, and the state's role in 'constituting the sector' (Chaves et al., 2004; Carmel & Harlock, 2008; Alcock & Kendall, 2011). In this article the focus is on the relations between third sector organisations and a range of locally-situated institutions that operate at varying degrees of distance from the state. In the UK context, such institutions are still highly dependent on the state, leaving voluntary organisations effectively reliant on government resources (Milbourne & Cushman, 2015). The article explores how insider/outsider relationships or what Lune & Oberstein (2001) call 'forms of embeddedness' are characteristic of third sector organisations' work at a local scale. It argues that these relationships are both facilitated and constrained through integrative marginalisation. As a result the visions of change advanced by third sector organisations that work closely with local institutions tend to become constrained within the institutional environment. In this article a 'vision' is defined as an articulation of a future state devised in order to change the thinking of state and institutional actors (Grin, Rotmans & Schot, 2010, p82).

This article contributes to voluntary sector scholarship by presenting examples of integrative marginalisation, describing its characteristics, and considering whether it shows potential for change at a wider scale. It situates voluntary sector advocacy within its institutional context, and suggests that either additional state intervention or some form of institutional crisis may be required to achieve the environmental goals for which voluntary sector organisations strive.

The article draws on an empirical study of three urban 'anchor

institutions' (Taylor & Luter, 2013) that have sought to lead their sectors (higher education, local government, and social housing) in carbon reduction. While the overall focus of the study was the three institutions, this article examines their relations with third sector organisations that have acted as advocates of change. It brings together scholarship on sociotechnical transitions, which focuses especially on levels and processes of change, with scholarship on voluntary organisations and especially their role within organisational fields (Craig et al., 2004; Macmillan, 2015).

Four salient features of integrative marginalisation can be identified. These include discourses of welcome and acceptance; relatively small investments of funding or staff support; the exclusion of substantial changes from mainstream institutional decision-making; and the assertion of institutional priorities that restrict and contain third sector aspirations. While the observed result is that more radical proposals continue to be sidelined, the process has the potential to increase levels of acceptance for 'green niches', thereby strengthening the resources for institutional change through the promotion of divergent logics (Thornton et al., 2012).

The article begins by placing the research in the context of the changes required to progress towards a low-carbon future, summarising the literature on sociotechnical transitions and on institutional change. I move on to consider the position of third sector organisations in advocating and advancing the institutional changes required to meet environmental goals. Third, I introduce the empirical research and briefly describe the case studies undertaken. I then present the findings from the research, showing how third sector visions are both accepted and restricted within institutional contexts. Finally, I consider the possibilities that integrative marginalisation offers for institutional change and some policy implications.

Sociotechnical transitions and institutional change

Scholarship on transitions towards a 'low carbon economy and society' (Urry, 2011) is increasingly focused on the contested and complex processes of transitions, rather than their headline goals. Transitions are

incremental and unpredictable, with occasional dramatic shifts. Fossil-fuel dependency is underpinned by and locked into a 'techno-institutional complex' of rules, norms and technology-dependent social practices (Rip & Kemp, 1998; Unruh, 2000). Good intentions are therefore seldom translated into straightforward processes of change (Voß, Bauknecht & Kemp, 2006; Bulkeley et al., 2010). Geels' multi-level perspective on transitions (Geels, 2002; 2004) draws on innovation studies to outline a process in which change is the (unpredictable) consequence of new technologies or practices becoming established in 'niches', encountering the obduracy of established 'regimes' and occasionally breaking through in new configurations that have the potential to influence events at a 'landscape' scale. In this context a 'regime' is an intermediate configuration of institutions and technologies - rather than being associated with the state, as in many voluntary sector studies (e.g. Mullins, 2000). Within such transition models, the value-driven action characteristic of third sector organisations is generally backgrounded in favour of an emphasis on technological change (Goddard & Vallance, 2013).

Organisational studies also affirm the complexity and incremental nature of change, especially studies informed by the 'new institutionalist' approach (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). The kind of changes envisaged in the quest to end fossil-fuel dependency - which involve altered political priorities, new temporal perspectives (in recognising the rights of future generations) and changed social practices (affecting every energy-consuming element of daily life) - demand action on an institutional scale. In other words, they involve changing the collectivities that form the building blocks of advanced societies: education systems, local and national governments, transport regulation, healthcare and more.

Institutional change is hampered by the same phenomenon of lock-in that affects changes in energy generation and consumption. Institutions develop and maintain durable norms and values, establish systems of meaning and command adherence to 'logics of appropriateness' or taken-for-granted modes of action (March & Olsen, 1989) that guide individuals' behaviour within institutional contexts. To reorient an institution demands a reformulation of such logics to align with a new vision (Seo & Creed, 2002).

The ingredients of reformulation are available in the form of 'multiple logics' (Friedland & Alford, 1991). These logics are differing guiding values that hold sway in different institutional environments. Thornton et al. (2012) suggest that institutionally situated actors separate, blend and recombine multiple logics, transposing cultural symbols and material practices from one institution to another. In doing so they engage in 'institutional work' - the everyday processes of maintaining, repairing and dismantling institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The concept of institutional work highlights the situated agency of actors, providing a bridge that links the agenda-led work of third sector organisations and the institutional contexts they seek to change.

Third sector organisations and institutional change

The complex dynamics between the situated agency of actors within institutions and the embeddedness of sociotechnical systems are echoed in voluntary sector scholarship. The notion of a clearly defined 'voluntary sector', 'third sector' or 'civil society' has been challenged through two decades of research examining the fluid and contested arrangements through which third sector organisations define themselves and depict their role in society. Alcock and Kendall (2011), for example, highlight the 'dual process of decontestation and contention' through which the sector has been constituted, pointing to the 'restless fluidity and elasticity of boundaries' (p. 453) as third sector organisations adapt to new forms of governance, offers of resources and expansion of responsibilities. Carmel and Harlock (2008) describe the third sector as part of a 'governable terrain' and a site for policy intervention; Craig, Taylor and Parkes (2004) show how the increasing acknowledgement of the role of the third sector by policymakers generates 'new dilemmas as they strive to maintain their autonomy while increasingly operating as insiders'. More recently, the elasticity of the 'voluntary sector' has been demonstrated in varying responses to fiscal austerity, from diversification to restructuring to 'ignoring' or 'cooperating' (Kirsop-Taylor, 2019). Milbourne and Cushman (2015) argue that the 'invited spaces' in which third sector organisations can influence policy agendas are insufficient and shrinking.

This literature emphasises that third sector organisations exist and are defined in relation to those who exercise governance and economic powers. They are actors within 'porously bounded and discursively framed "fields"' (Macmillan, 2015) seeking to influence both what the field is and their own positions within it (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). In doing so, however, they are at risk of 'institutional incorporation' (Martens, 2001; Hemmings, 2017) in which they end up in a client relationship with the institutions they seek to influence. Such relationships typically include contractual arrangements to deliver services and some element of representation at an institutional scale.

Institutional incorporation and independence may be seen as poles on a spectrum of engagement between third sector organisations and institutions. This article examines a different potential outcome, in which third sector organisations gain a degree of acceptance but remain unable to achieve significant change within the organisations they seek to influence. Incorporation is a possible, but not inevitable, consequence.

In the context of environmental action, Smith (2007, p. 436) argues that conflicts are to be expected because 'green niches are constructed in opposition to incumbent regimes' ('regime' is used here in the sense deployed within the sociotechnical transitions literature). Seyfang (2010) outlines three ways in which green niches might become mainstreamed: through individual replication, through scaling up, and through translation of ideas and practices from 'niche' to 'regime' scale. The first option is slow; the second fraught with practical difficulties. The third depends on a suitable opportunity (p. 7631):

> For this translation process to occur effectively, a pre-existing condition of a crisis in the existing regime and an opportunity for niche practices to inform mainstream solutions is required.

Seyfang presents climate change as such a crisis, and recent declarations of a 'climate emergency' by municipal governments (UK examples include Bristol, Leeds, Bradford and London) appear to acknowledge this. Crisis or dilemma provides an opportunity for institutional rethinking and reinterpretation (Bevir & Rhodes, 2005; Krueger & Gibbs, 2010) through the reworking of institutional traditions and beliefs. The contradictions presented by a crisis may be a source of

change (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009) but may also stimulate an ongoing dialectic of 'response and counter-response' (Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen, & Van de Ven, 2009). As actors on the edges, third sector organisations have the freedom to introduce new ideas and to challenge entrenched practices (Craig et al., 2004), but their ability to seed alternative visions, and the realignment of institutional logics that must follow, is contingent on the institutional environment.

Seo & Creed's discussion of embedded agency (2002, p.236) suggests that new logics of action need to be sufficiently familiar to gain traction:

> The dialectical concept of social actors as active exploiters of institutional contradictions […] suggests that institutional change agents are unlikely to invent totally new frames or logics of action unfamiliar to other participants […]. Instead, agents are likely to adopt a frame or set of frames available in the broader, heterogeneous institutional context…

This suggests that the scope for 'green niches' to become mainstream depends not only on the opportunity of a crisis, but on the right kind of crisis: one in which logics can be adopted that make sense to institutional actors while at the same time permitting significant change.

Research design and methods

This paper examines one aspect of a broader study on the role of institutions in transitions to a low-carbon society. The full study focused on three cities in the north of England and the role of three urban institutions (a university, a municipal government and a provider of affordable housing) in shifting local practices and wider institutional orientations. From the broader research data, this paper examines the particular role of third sector organisations (including 'hybrid' organisations, discussed below) in advocating change. In the case of the university I examine the role of an advocacy organisation promoting 'carbon literacy'. In the case of the municipal government, I examine municipal responses to the work of local third sector organisations. The housing organisation is examined as a hybrid case (Anheier & Krlev, 2015;

Mullins & Jones, 2015) as it is constituted as a non-profit organisation and fulfils to a degree the role of a civil society organisation within its wider institutional context. I expand upon this summary below.

To examine change and processes of constructing and reconstructing visions of alternative futures within organisations, the research used an interpretive case study approach, following Flyvbjerg's articulation (2004) of 'phronetic' case study research. Through detailed case study analysis, he argues (p.302) a researcher arrives at 'a pragmatically governed interpretation of the studied … practices'. The practices examined in this instance were the roles of organisational actors in envisaging 'alternative future scenarios' (Baert, 2003, p. 101) and using these as resources for change.

The three case study organisations were chosen as 'strategic' cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). They were examples where it was considered most likely, after examining comparator organisations, that there would be evidence of significant shifts away from fossil-fuel dependency, as well as influence on environmental practices and policies at a wider urban scale. The purpose of the selection was to examine processes of change in instances where 'transition' was most likely to be observed.

Each organisation had publicly positioned itself as a leader in environmental action within its sector. Each had potential influence at a wider urban scale because it fulfilled the role of an 'anchor institution': a durable and stable organisation, often instituted through legislation, rooted in an urban location and locally significant as an employer and contributor to the local economy (Alperovitz & Howard, 2005; Taylor & Luter, 2013). Each also represents an institutional field within the UK: higher education, local government, and social housing. In the discussion that follows, I use pseudonyms throughout to avoid identifying organisations that have requested anonymity.

In this paper I focus on how the visions of environmental action advanced by third sector organisations influence institutional change, or resistance to change. These visions have their origins outside the institutional environment and have been introduced into the individual organisations studied.

In the case of the university ('Millbrook City University'), I consider the role of 'carbon literacy'. Carbon literacy is a tool that enables organisations

to understand the impact of fossil fuel consumption, and learn about climate change and the actions that can be taken to reduce their carbon impact. Carbon literacy was promoted by a locally based voluntary organisation, 'Do Your Bit'. The carbon literacy vision rests on an implicit theory of evidence-based decision-making: given the right education about the carbon impact of their choices, individuals or organisations undertaking carbon literacy training will make less carbon-intensive decisions about everything from energy use in the home to large-scale organisational investments. Millbrook City University had worked closely with Do Your Bit and had adopted its approach to carbon literacy training, with a strong emphasis on offering training to students.

In the municipality studied ('Upper Midsville Council'), I focus on the relationships between the municipality and local environmental third sector organisations, including a community-based energy charity, Warm-Up Midsville, that had undertaken energy-saving work on domestic properties in the city. Warm-Up Midsville's ethos emphasised locally-led action and partnership with other organisations in the city. Its low-carbon vision could be described as a democratising one, putting renewable energy and energy-efficiency measures in the hands of local communities.

The social housing provider ('Rivets Housing Group'), as indicated above, is considered as a hybrid case both because of its own constitution as a non-profit organisation outside the public sector, and the evolution of its environmental vision. In using the term 'hybrid' I follow Anheier and Krlev's definition (2015, p.194) of organisations that:

> straddle the borders between the public and the private, as well as those between the for-profit and the nonprofit sectors … they often combine characteristics and logics conventionally attached to the seemingly distinct spheres of the market, the state, and civil society.

Mullins and Jones (2015) describe housing associations - of which the case study organisation is an example - as hybrid organisations operating within state regulation but with a historic voluntary sector ethos and, increasingly, large-scale commercialisation. In such organisations 'competing logics of state, market and community play out continuously' (p.262).

While the origins of the housing group's environmental vision were

external, the approach it adopted was a home-brewed amalgam of ideas derived from a number of external third sector organisations. I therefore examine Rivets Housing itself as the carrier of a third sector vision within its institutional field, and discuss how its quest to promote a vision of sustainability collided with its institutional environment.

Each case study involved a series of semi-structured interviews with individuals at a range of seniority levels who were involved either strategically or operationally in environmental activities. Interviews were also conducted with local stakeholders who had established relationships with the case study organisations. A focus group discussion was held in each location to test and explore initial findings. A total of 50 interviews took place and all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically coded.

Limits to green leadership

Each of the case study organisations espoused broad visions of environmental sustainability, often accompanied by heroic proclamations of their green credentials. Carbon reduction was a key element, but in each case the overarching vision was one of environmental action on a broad front. Millbrook City University's slogan during the course of the research was 'let's make a sustainable planet'. Rivets Housing proclaimed a philosophy of 'one planet living', a commitment not to consume more than its fair share of the earth's resources. The three pillars of its mission were 'people, property, planet'. Upper Midsville had a long history of environmental action and expressed an ambition to become an 'energy self-sufficient city'. In each case the organisation considered itself a leader in its institutional field, taking actions that were deemed to set standards for good practice in higher education, housing or local government - frequently legitimised through awards and media coverage.

In the case of Millbrook City University and Upper Midsville, however, practices were less radical than the visions put forward by the third sector organisations discussed in this paper. Within Rivets Housing, as outlined below, containment of the environmental vision began with financial and regulatory changes within the wider institutional field.

The processes observed fit a model of integrative marginalisation in which an environmental vision is both welcomed and sidelined. Both at an organisational and an institutional field level, no direct opposition was observed during the research. Carbon reduction goals were pre-legitimised through the official decarbonisation policies of successive governments and through the adoption at a sectoral scale of 'green' discourses and guidance. Experience in practice, however, shows such legitimation to be bounded by the logics that prevail at an organisational scale and across the wider institutional field.

Integrative marginalisation may be characterised by four salient features. These include discourses of welcome and acceptance; relatively small investments of funding or staff support; the exclusion of substantial changes from mainstream institutional decision-making; and the assertion of institutional priorities that marginalise third sector aspirations. These four features may be sequential, but may also occur simultaneously at different levels of an organisation. I describe how these characteristics were observed within each case study below.

Millbrook City University

The charity Do Your Bit, although small, has become part of an established core group of environmental organisations within its conurbation and has persuaded several major organisations to undertake its training, including Millbrook City University. In this section I discuss how integrative marginalisation can be observed through practices that both embedded and constrained Do Your Bit's vision and activities.

Welcome and acceptance
Do Your Bit's vision of behaviour change leading to carbon reduction was promoted via a 'train the trainers' approach, through which it was hoped an initial batch of trainees would subsequently teach carbon literacy to their peers. Millbrook City University had made carbon literacy a core element of its education for sustainable development (ESD) programme for staff and students. Staff were recruited - albeit on short-term contracts - to promote carbon literacy as part of the university's approach to

environmental responsibility. Carbon literacy was presented as adding value to the student experience:

> We're looking at offering carbon literacy training, so we're doing that at the moment, training up students to then train other students, so it's about enriching their experience while they're here, equipping them with more skills and knowledge… (senior manager)

The university had committed itself to training all 37,000 of its students in carbon literacy. As well as making this training part of its offer to students and staff, it also delivered carbon literacy training to external partners including the local city council. Interviewees from academic faculties, however, questioned the conflation of carbon literacy with education for sustainable development. Welcome and acceptance for carbon literacy was concentrated among a relatively small group of staff.

Investment and support

The extent of the university's commitment to a vision inspired by a third sector partner was limited by its levels of investment. While Millbrook City University had invested millions of pounds in construction technologies as a demonstration of its commitment to carbon reduction, including a £140 million campus boasting low-carbon features such as a heat network, the investment in staff delivering carbon literacy was in the tens of thousands of pounds, and fewer than one hundred places on training workshops had been offered each year at the time of the research. One interviewee commented:

> …money's always an issue, you know, ensuring the sustainability of the project and ensuring there's funding for it, I think that's always a bit of a challenge. (Junior manager)

The idea of a 'snowball effect of trainers training trainers', as one external stakeholder put it, did not materialise either at the university or more generally across the city: nearly 3,000 people had been trained over three years across the municipal area, against the aspiration of training 37,000 students. Another external stakeholder and enthusiastic proponent of carbon literacy accepted the relatively limited impact of the work so far:

I would say …that there is not mass buy-in. I think - well, there's a difference between if you ask someone, is this a good thing, yes, how highly motivated are you to do something in your personal actions about it? Then I think the approval rating would start to fall. Do you feel able and empowered to introduce carbon literacy or environmental ESD into your subject areas? That would be minuscule. (Third sector interviewee)

This comment reflects that even among organisations purporting to be environmental leaders, it is easier to fund symbolic capital investments such as new buildings than to support relatively low-cost activities that may more fundamentally reorient the activities and priorities of the organisation.

Exclusion from mainstream decision-making

It is possible to welcome an approach and simultaneously marginalise it by keeping it within the lower echelons of an institution's hierarchy. The third sector interviewee cited above admitted they had been unable to present the case for carbon literacy to the university's governing body - 'the board of deans is as high as we've got'. Individual academics had bolted carbon literacy elements onto course content, but the numbers of students engaged remained 'dozens of students being trained, where it has to be thousands'. Institutional decision-making was still concentrated among traditional leaders. One executive director commented: '… if the deputy vice-chancellor or vice-chancellor doesn't want a particular initiative then there's not a lot you can do about it.'

Assertion of institutional priorities

Coupled with the exclusion of significant change has been an assertion of institutional priorities: attracting more students, modernising and rationalising the campus, and maximising opportunities for students to find work after graduation. Even in an environment where carbon literacy is welcomed and applauded, the market pressures of higher education in the English context have proved more insistent; the same executive director commented that 'agendas such as sustainability aren't helped in those contexts because everything else floats to the surface'.

By 2019 the university had trained more than 1,000 students in carbon literacy. At the same time, however, in common with other UK

universities, it continued to promote itself as an international destination (with associated environmental impacts in terms of air travel) and to invest in a major construction programme. The environmental vision, on this evidence, had not been allowed to challenge the institution's core logics.

Upper Midsville Council

In Upper Midsville the process of integrative marginalisation involved keeping third sector organisations at one remove from the municipality, as valued but ultimately dependent partners..

Welcome and acceptance

Official documents at Upper Midsville emphasised the importance of community engagement and partnership with third sector and neighbourhood-based groups. Such partnership was also stressed by elected councillors interviewed for the research. Yet partners were also held at arm's length.

One leading councillor emphasised the readiness to work with local communities on carbon reduction projects. But in this interviewee's view, the potential was limited because of the lack of third sector or community capacity:

> I think the community engagement is an important priority. You don't get many lukewarm people. You get the community champions and this sort of thing, and we've just been giving out very small grants to generate this stuff and actually try and transmit the enthusiasm of a small group in one particular area to the next area, but it's hard going, you know, people aren't lukewarm. They're either fully committed to it or it's not a consideration in their lives at all. (Senior councillor)

In this approach to partnership, the municipality is ready and willing but the interest is limited (and the incentives, as described by the councillor, are 'very small').

Investment and support

Financial support, interviewees stressed, was dependent on success in applying for grants or being chosen as a partner in a larger programme.

The municipality had several successful partnerships with the city's universities to benefit from European Union funding. But third sector partners, with their emphasis on community-based leadership, did not feature strongly. While senior staff stressed the need to follow opportunities as they arose, frontline workers perceived this as a lack of long term commitment. One worker - whose own contract was about to come to an end - commented:

> There is political will and support, but there's no money, so without that I can't do anything. (Frontline worker)

Investment was geared to the perception that it would unlock additional resources, rather than as a way of furthering strategic priorities. This led to a pragmatic emphasis on short-term gains:

> …if it makes money then it continues, and if it doesn't … then the priority drops. […] I think that the impact of resource cuts means that it drives people into their own corners and it produces a very competitive environment and that gets in the way of good joint work. (Middle manager)

Exclusion from mainstream decision-making

A local charity, Warm-Up Midsville, provides an insight into how the terms of partnership were defined and constrained by the municipality. The charity had a long history of close working with the municipality, but complained that the strong expressions of support from elected councillors were frustrated by the actions of municipal staff who were engaged in 'empire building'. An interviewee from Warm-Up Midsville emphasised the role of a political context of austerity in marginalising third sector perspectives:

> Since 2009 the cuts, the cuts, the cuts, the cuts - have just changed the atmosphere within local authorities, probably all of them, to the point where people are reorganising departments every other year and people are losing jobs all the time. It's highly competitive, the consequence of that seems to be … that they take that same competitive and fearful kind of attitude to their partners outside as well. So I think it has a really detrimental effect towards partnership working.

A vision of locally-led and locally accountable low-carbon action facilitated by community-based and third sector organisations was consequently translated by municipal officers into municipal 'leadership' and control.

Assertion of institutional priorities

In Upper Midsville the visions of third sector partners were marginalised, not because they were opposed in themselves but because they were not considered significant in a bigger picture of institutional survival. This picture reflects a wider institutional context for local government in a climate of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) in which responsibilities have been devolved to local institutions while resources have been simultaneously withdrawn. For Upper Midsville, like many English local authorities, this led to a focus on income-generating activities.

Rivets Housing Group

At Rivets Housing Group the salient issue during the course of the research was the survival of a strong environmental vision within a troubled sectoral context. As a hybrid organisation with a voluntary sector ethos, it was dealing with 'competing logics' (Mullins & Jones, 2015) both internally and at a sectoral scale. The process of integrative marginalisation can be observed both in the way Rivets Housing Group responded to the environmental visions of other third sector organisations, and in the way its own environmental vision fared within the wider housing association sector.

Rivets Housing Group is a large housing provider in the north of England. An internal reorganisation created an opening for one particular director to prioritise environmental action. This was advocated partly to alleviate fuel poverty among the group's tenants, but also in order to pursue a more aspirational green agenda.

Welcome and acceptance

The initial integration of an environmental vision, largely adopted from third sector organisations such as the Eden Project, was rapid. The organisation was rebranded with the three priorities of 'people, property, planet'; an environmental team of more than 25 staff was recruited, and an internal programme was initiated to encourage pro-environmental behaviours across the organisation, backed by pledges coordinated by 'champions' in each department.

At this stage it would appear that the visions adopted from external third sector organisations had been successfully integrated into the housing group. Approval at the highest levels of the organisation was reinforced by positive publicity in trade journals, national press and at conferences.

At an institutional field or sectoral scale (Thornton et al., 2012) there was also an initial period of welcome and acceptance. There were frequent invitations to speak at conferences and the organisation's projects were cited as examples of 'good practice'. However, the provision of a platform for the organisation's achievements was not reflected in changed policies or practice across the social housing sector.

Investment and support

As well as seeking to make its own operations carbon neutral and recruiting an environmental team, Rivets embarked on a series of measures to test the efficacy of environmental improvements to its housing stock and advocated for action on carbon reduction across the housing sector. It retrofitted more than 3,000 homes with new boilers, double glazing and wall insulation; installed photovoltaic panels on 6,000 homes; and experimented with Passivhaus insulation systems on one new development. The environmental team also commissioned research into the health benefits of fuel-efficient boilers. Compared with the other two organisations studied, the initial investment was significant. However, this dropped off rapidly when the organisation restructured.

Exclusion from mainstream decision-making

When the political climate changed - as it did shortly before the

research reported here began - the exclusion of substantial change and the assertion of prevailing institutional priorities rapidly followed, first at a sectoral scale and subsequently within the housing group itself. This process was accentuated by changes in government policy that served to undermine the housing group's financial stability. Successive reductions in the feed-in tariff payable for solar power generation were followed in 2015 by a national change in the financial regime for affordable housing in England: instead of raising rents to pay for investment, housing associations were told to reduce them.

These policy changes focused attention on financial stability across the social housing sector, but left organisations with large or 'risky' investment programmes exposed. Rivets Housing Group attracted the attention of the regulatory body, the Homes and Communities Agency (subsequently rebranded as Homes England), and was forced to restructure its operations, making more than 300 staff redundant and selling off some of its commercial operations, in order to remove perceived financial risks. This prompted an internal recalibration of priorities.

Assertion of institutional priorities

Rapid restructuring in response to regulatory intervention effectively downgraded the organisation's environmental activities, marginalising them as 'distractions' (in the words of one senior executive) in the context of its 'core' business. A policy change affecting the institutional field changed the internal balance of competing logics. Rivets Housing Group's environmental team was disbanded; this was justified on the basis that 'green' activities would now be adopted throughout the organisation. At the same time those within the group who had previously been tasked with advancing the environmental agenda now began to marginalise it as 'fluffy' in contrast to 'core' services:

> We've had to like refocus very much on our core services. Clearly we still see environmental as part of that, but … a lot of those were what people would call the fluffy services, which I hate but never mind, [they] have had to be cut back so that we can refocus on core… (middle manager)

The reassertion of the institutional priority of focusing on 'core' housing development and management was further signalled by removing

some of the more aspirational language from the organisation's mission statement and the progressive downgrading of environmental activities in its publicity. Its 2017 annual report and accounts, published after the fieldwork reported here was completed, only uses the word 'green' once within a 129-page document. It includes only one mention of the word 'environment' in the context of environmental action, in which Rivets Housing Group promises to 'deliver social and environmental value' within a framework of value for money.

Integrative marginalisation in the case of Rivets Housing Group displays initial discourses of welcome and acceptance at both organisational and field level; funding and support at a more substantial scale than in the other case study organisations; the initial inclusion of environmental visions but their subsequent exclusion from mainstream decision-making; and a clear reassertion of institutional priorities.

Discussion

Integrative marginalisation is both a process and a state of being, a holding-in-tension that admits the possibility of change while denying its full potential. It simultaneously permits and prohibits the hope of a significantly changed future. This reflects insights from studies of sociotechnical systems and institutional scholarship on the complexity and incremental character of change.

It also reflects the field perspective in voluntary sector studies. Macmillan (2015) underlines the constantly contested nature of the fields within which third sector organisations operate, characterised by the 'struggles and strategies of actively engaged participants' (p.107). Macmillan continues:

> Actors are thus engaged in mutual field sense-making in their efforts to describe and articulate the nature of their values, activities and purposes. As such they are actively involved in interpreting, framing and shaping the field, with more or less persuasive accounts of issues, trends and projects, designed to advance a cause or position in the field.

Alcock and Kendall (2011) characterise third sector actors as searching for 'decontested territory' in which they can find shared agendas and common ground; but as Craig et al (2004) comment, this involves difficult trade-offs between influence and autonomy, with a risk of 'incorporation into the state'. Integrative marginalisation, seen from this perspective, may manifest itself in a variety of ways while displaying common features, most notable of which is a perpetually unfulfilled but undefeated quest for change. As Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p.7) note, 'even under generally stable conditions, actors are engaged in a constant set of adjustments that introduce incremental change into constructed social worlds'.

However, the environmental goals advocated by the case study organisations at the outset of this research implied much more radical action. From a transition perspective the 'green niche' must break through and overcome 'regime resistance' (Geels, 2014). From a transition perspective, the promotion and protection of niches is a necessary precursor to regime destabilisation - a process marked by reduced flows of resources to the incumbent regime, reduced legitimacy and public support, and reduced confidence within organisations' industrial or technological sectors (Turnheim & Geels, 2013). While both Upper Midsville Council and Rivets Housing suffered reduced resources during the period of the research, and Rivets Housing suffered reduced legitimacy as a consequence of its retrenchment, these pressures closed down rather than opened up scope for new environmental agendas.

The perspective of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), suggests that integrative marginalisation is a fluid and active process rather than an impasse. It is the consequence of multiple unnoticed conflicts and tensions between actors within the same institutional setting, advancing or resisting visions and actions that may challenge prevailing logics. Integrative marginalisation contains the seeds of change in two senses: it encloses them within organisational and institutional niches, but simultaneously preserves the possibility of their spread and multiplication.

If this is a dynamic state of affairs, however, it may often be an invisible dynamism. The three case studies suggest that sudden or substantial change is unlikely, though not impossible. They suggest, too, that some form of external stimulus may be required in order to create greater legitimacy for visions of low carbon futures, particularly at an institutional

scale. Without some form of crisis or shock to the system, niches are likely to remain niches: tolerated, encouraged even, but never breaking through to change the 'regime'. However, as the case of Rivets Housing makes clear, dilemma and crisis can also become the occasion for a retreat from radicalism and the reassertion of traditional institutional priorities.

The problem of integrative marginalisation poses challenges both for third sector organisations, and for the institutions they seek to influence, in terms of identifying and measuring success. A greater sensitivity to the dynamic interplay of actions at different levels in driving change, as considered in the literature on sociotechnical transitions (Geels, 2002; 2004) might help organisations articulate more coherently the links between their environmental expectations, practices, and achievements.

This suggests a case for supportive state and/or institutional action if the environmental ambitions of third sector organisations are to play a part in achieving public policy goals of carbon reduction, as enshrined in the UK's Climate Change Act 2008. This legislation sets a legally binding target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 80% by 2050, compared with 1990 levels. Recognising that integrative marginalisation may be widespread, even among organisations that consider themselves to be environmental leaders, highlights the role of the state in shaping the dynamics of the institutional fields in which third sector actors operate. This echoes the observations of Milbourne and Cushman (2015) and Mullins and Jones (2015) in asserting the state's continuing influence despite its retreat within the UK from direct support for third sector organisations (Kirsop-Taylor, 2019).

Conclusion

This article has conceptualised the relationship between third sector advocates of carbon reduction and the organisations and institutions they seek to influence as one of integrative marginalisation. From empirical study it has described salient characteristics of this process.

For third sector organisations working on the edges of institutional fields, the effect of integrative marginalisation may be to make the

advancement of their green visions contingent on moments of crisis or dilemma, but also more vulnerable to such moments, as in the case of Rivets Housing Group. Familiar tactics of persuasion and lobbying may be sufficient to obtain a degree of welcome and acceptance, and even to achieve enough investment and support for a sense of progress to be palpable. But the adoption of a green vision within an organisation may also remove its critical edge, excluding radical or institutionally-destabilising options. In such circumstances the primacy of institutional goals and priorities is reasserted. This was particularly evident at Millbrook City University and Upper Midsville Council.

A challenge for future research is to identify, if possible, what kind of crisis or dilemma (Bevir & Rhodes, 2012) may be productive in terms of breaking through the tension of integrative marginalisation and generating systemic change, whether through action by the state or as a response to a deepening environmental emergency. A potentially productive crisis is likely to include some of the elements of destabilisation identified by Turnheim & Geels (2013), presenting challenges to organisations' resources, support, and partners' confidence; but this may also require shifts at a macro level in addition to the bottom-up advocacy characteristic of third sector organisations.

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Declarations of interest: none.