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Re-reading civil society action for environmental sustainability

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Citation:

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Introduction: Re-reading civil society action for environmental sustainability

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There is now an extensive body of published research, cutting across scholarly disciplines and beyond, which explores the role of civil society and/or voluntary sector activity in achieving change towards more environmentally sustainable societies through locally-focused action. Prominent themes include the diverse roles of grassroots endeavours in enacting change against or on the margins of prevailing political and economic norms (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; North, 2011; Markantoni and Woolvin, 2015; Smith et al., 2016; Haf and Parkhill, 2017; Van Veelen, 2017), as well as an emerging literature engaging critically with the deployment of the voluntary sector as a vehicle for governmental policy goals (Eadson and Foden, 2014; 2019; Creamer, 2015; Taylor Aiken, 2015). There is a well-established and relatively sizeable formal environmental voluntary sector – there were as many as 7,662 organisations in 2008 based on analysis by Clifford et al. (2013) – although this represents only 1-2% of the overall formal voluntary sector (ibid.). Despite broad academic interest elsewhere in the social sciences, civil society activity with an explicit environmental focus is yet to attract sustained attention within the field of voluntary sector studies. For example, as of May 2020 only three articles in the Voluntary Sector Review's back-catalogue contain the terms "environmental" or "sustainability" (in their ecological senses), "sustainable development", "climate change" or "low carbon" in the title or abstract (see Sibley, 2010; Clifford et al., 2013; Kirsop-Taylor, 2015). The primary aim of this special section is to address this gap, to deepen engagement and conversation between voluntary sector research and research on local action for environmental sustainability.

Bringing these two literatures into dialogue with each other also provides an opportune moment to reflect on a number of broader questions and insights from other corners of the social sciences. These concern the position of the 'third' sector – broadly defined – with respect to the state and market; the relationship between formal and informal spheres of political and economic activity; and, indeed, both the internal coherence of each of these categories and the cogency of the oppositional distinctions between them. A second aim of the collection is therefore – to borrow a term from Gibson-Graham (2008) – to *re-read* civil society engagement in local action for environmental sustainability, reconsidering and explicating its contingent and entangled nature. Articles in this themed section seek to reveal and explore how civil society initiatives negotiate emergent contestations and alliances within and between sectors, while navigating their multiple, competing and complementary logics. More broadly, each contribution seeks to inhabit, rather than explain away or simplify, messiness and openness in the construction of civil society action.

The five articles in this special section engage with this complexity in quite different ways, setting grassroots environmental action in an institutional context ranging from interpersonal relations to macroeconomic developments, demonstrating their unequal reach and impacts, but avoiding any assumptions as to the explanatory priority of any particular scale or focus. Different theoretical perspectives are brought to bear on a diverse set of case studies, in terms of the focus of environmental action, the underlying principles and resulting approaches to organising and structuring activity, and the geographical and socioeconomic settings in which it takes place.

Sam Ramsden presents a richly empirical account of sustainable place making in the post-industrial north of England. It focuses primarily on an urban agriculture project set within a disadvantaged part

of the city of Hull, bringing to life the experiences of participating local residents and the impacts on their lives. In this case, while environmental concerns provide the impetus for action, the project is most successful as a vehicle for mitigating concrete impacts of socioeconomic disadvantage, in community capacity building and cultivating a shared, accessible outdoor space. In particular, participants noted benefits to their mental and physical health, especially gaining confidence, establishing routines and combating isolation; potential benefits were also observed with respect to their economic prospects, in accruing experience of voluntary work, developing practical skills and in some cases attaining formal qualifications. However, these largely positive individual experiences are set against a somewhat frustrating policy context, in which the sustainability (in the sense of long term viability) of initiatives is hampered by reliance on short term funding and shifting political priorities, not least the period of austerity and changing welfare regimes in which the participants palpably find themselves. In highlighting these contradictions, Ramsden introduces a critical openness, and a tension between logics and interests, running in different directions throughout this themed section.

Julian Dobson sets his discussion at the intersection of sociotechnical transitions scholarship and voluntary sector studies. He introduces the notion of 'integrative marginalisation' to make sense of the seemingly contradictory relationships between large-scale, locality-based, ostensibly green 'anchor institutions' (in this case a university, a local authority and a housing association, all in the north of England) and the smaller environmentally-focused voluntary sector organisations with which they inconsistently engage. In doing so he adds nuance to familiar depictions of the insider/outsider status of the voluntary sector and large (quasi-)public institutions, a theme later addressed from a somewhat different perspective by Van Veelen and Eadson. The recurring pattern of engagement through Dobson's three case studies is one of discursive acceptance of the aims of the smaller organisations, and varying degrees of financial and practical support, but typically little in the way of influence on substantive or strategic decision making processes, and a tendency to be marginalised with respect to 'core' priorities, especially in times of crisis. The latter is pertinent when considering the increasing impacts of national austerity on local institutions, whereby responsibility was devolved at the same time as material resources are withdrawn, recalling Ramsden's observations from a similar geographical setting. Yet, Dobson's conclusions are not narrowly pessimistic. The final contradiction of integrative marginalisation is in both permitting and restricting potentially transformative change.

Gerald Taylor Aiken, Christian Schulz and Benedikt Schmidt introduce a somewhat different European urban context, basing their study of community economies in Luxembourg's second city of Esch-sur-Alzette. Another contrast is with the foregoing papers' focus on voluntary sector initiatives that, whether by choice or necessity, align their priorities with those of mainstream public sector organisations; Taylor Aiken and colleagues instead focus on more self-consciously 'alternative' endeavours that are openly critical of mainstream policy and politics, most notably the prevailing paradigm of economic growth. There are, however, also similarities: like the northern English examples, and in contrast with perceptions of its much larger neighbour, Luxembourg City, Esch-sur-Alzette is historically an industrial city with a left-of-centre political tradition. Despite the focus on ostensibly oppositional alternative economies, what emerges is another demonstration of the inseparability of civil society from the state and market, inhabiting many of the same spaces and networks. Far from seeing this as a curtailment of their radical potential, the authors see this as an opportunity for enacting heterodox economic visions in the political realm.

Bregje van Veelen and Will Eadson continue the theme of entanglement between civil society, state and market in their study of democratic governance in UK community energy projects. Using the concept of assemblage they unpick the ways that projects are enrolled within a wide range of intermediation processes. This approach goes beyond viewing intermediaries as organisations who

support or constrain action: the authors emphasises how a whole range of different material and non-material entities intermediate in processes of 'becoming-democratic'. For instance, they discuss the role of technologies, built environment and landscape factors in shaping how community energy projects are enacted. This goes beyond a unidirectional account of intermediaries: they are in turn produced by their relations with others material and non-material elements. This approach to understanding civil society action draws on a relational ontology, with emphasis on emergence and *becoming* which potentially offers a radically different perspective on the relationship between incumbent institutions, logics and visions for change.

Finally, Angela Ellis-Paine and colleagues offer a policy perspective on the contribution of the voluntary sector to UN Sustainable Development Goals. Their discussion of how SDGs have been implemented in the UK and the potential value of volunteering to achieving these goals provides another viewpoint on the wide range of logics that contribute to civil society action, while also introducing a perspective on the role of multi-level governance in shaping this action. The authors emphasise how SDGs could provide a shared vision across different institutions for understanding the value of volunteering, as well as a device for voluntary sector to hold government institutions to account for their actions. They argue that such a focus could foster greater collaboration across different institutions, in turn helping to expand and deepen societal understanding of voluntary sector action.

Overall, each of these papers offers new insights to our understanding of civil society action for environmental sustainability. But they also contribute to wider understanding of the voluntary sector. Conceptually they pose new questions and challenges for how we study the voluntary sector, bringing for instance ontological questions about materiality and entangled relations to the fore. They bring attention to both the potential for the voluntary sector to enact positive change in an array of domains, but the significant challenges faced in doing so. Here they contribute a variety of ways of viewing the interplay between voluntary sector actors and other entities, which offer 'shoots and leaves' for practical efforts to engender more radical change across institutions through voluntary sector action.

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