Facing the Truth or Living a Lie: Conformity, Radicalism and Activism

After giving an invited talk at an international geosciences conference in Vienna I was criticised by a member of the audience for painting too bleak a picture of policy on human-induced climate change. Apparently an approach was required that describes the opportunities and positive potential of stimulating future technologies, and avoids noting the thirty years of international inaction and the structural links between economic growth and global greenhouse gas emissions increases. A strategic concern appears to be that environmental messages need to be sold to people in friendly packaging, using psychology and marketing. This is reminiscent of the attacks on degrowth for being a term that will scare people off, leading to the suggestions that a better approach would be to use a French word or instead talk about flourishing potentials and dynamic equilibriums with nature (Cato 2010). Environmentalists are chastised for 'negative framing' that is claimed to empower what it attacks (Raworth 2015); so we should not mention being anti-capitalist and for degrowth, but nice things like doughnuts, that avoid scaring the Davos elite. Presumably opposing the nasty side of humanity – slavery, violence, torture, rape, pollution – should also never be conducted in oppositional terms (e.g., against, anti, non) for fear of empowering the perpetrators? Harsh realities should be made soft.

Actually, this has become a commonplace practice for many modern environmental non-governmental organisations which talk only indirectly, if at all, of the systemic problems behind environmental degradation (e.g., capitalism, corporations, military-industrial complex, economic growth) and prefer to 'frame' things in terms of the abstract (e.g., greening, sustaining) and metaphorical (spaceships, footprints, doughnuts). The position allies with the postmodernist belief that the world is just a human construct, a discourse where only the social exists, nature is dissolved and the choice of language is all that counts.

Postmodern thinking readily supports the derision of realism in its eagerness to reveal the conceptually mediated aspects of human understanding and to place this in a cultural and social context. This involves a valid contestation of science based on naïve objectivism, where truth is regarded as a self-evident result of empirical observation. However, the baby of valid knowledge has been thrown out with the naïve objectivist bath water. Real people living real lives are suffering under real economic systems. This is not some postmodern game of words where every human individual has their own 'truth' and can make up their own construction of reality. Pollution is damaging health and killing humans and non-humans, while corporations are profiting by avoiding environmental regulation, grabbing land and resources. Burning fossil fuels is creating greenhouse gases and these are accumulating in the upper atmosphere

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and the oceans, which is forcing global temperature increases and uncertain climatic change. That there is both biophysical and social reality is the reason why corporations are so concerned to control and combat information.

Denial of basic facts and undermining of science has become a business in corporate marketing and public relations where consultants specialise in the art of media control and public deception to prevent or weaken government regulation (Michaels 2005; Oreskes and Conway 2010). There are numerous examples, but just consider one, namely, policy on human induced climate change in the USA. This has seen climate denialism sponsored by right wing think-tanks (Jacques, et al. 2008), a hundred million dollars in direct political lobbying by corporations to fight the Kyoto Protocol (Grubb, et al. 1999), corporate funded economic propaganda (Spash 2002), and Exxon corporation spreading misinformation (Union of Concerned Scientists 2007). When corporate lobbying and media campaigns prove inadequate, the tactics moved to direct attacks on scientists and espionage. The 'Climategate' case of the University of East Anglia email theft and publication was followed by an orchestrated internet campaign where right-wing bloggers claimed climate science is nothing but a religion (Nerlich 2010). Even this has been surpassed by direct harassment, threats of violence and death threats (Hamilton 2011), and the complicity of governments in censorship (Spash 2010; 2014b). The attacks on climate change researchers and activists might appear unprecedented, but the general phenomenon has been present in the promotion and defence of new technologies from nuclear power (Carter 1987) to genetic modification (Burgess 1999; Robins 2012; Sarewitz 2004), and in the corporate denial that their products (e.g., DDT, cigarettes, asbestos, leaded petrol) cause health impacts (Oreskes and Conway 2010). The extent to which 'public relations' firms have specialised in public deception on behalf of the rich and powerful has been made even more self-evident by the scandal over rigging elections and the Brexit vote through targeted disinformation campaigns organised by Cambridge Analytica on the basis of personal data from Facebook (Graham-Harrison and Cadwalladr 2018).

Knowledge is not neutral and knowledge of environmental harm due to industrial practices means criticising those who support and profit from those practices. Natural scientists are trained to believe their knowledge is value free. Consider then the conflict for climate scientists whose knowledge is actually a direct assault on the modern industrial state and its institutions. More than this, they criticise all those whose lives are unintentionally intertwined in the reproduction of industrial society through their daily practices (e.g., driving a car, flying, buying corporate products). Modern personal identities are intertwined with corporate products and services that normalise unsustainable consumption (Groves, et al. 2016). Scientists appear doubly ill-prepared for the consequences, because they are unwittingly challenging the full range of societal actors and also their own practices, as members of modern society. Activists

more explicitly fight for truth and justice on issues such as human-induced climate change, but may find this no less emotionally and psychologically challenging. Facing a daily dose of the reality that is modern societies' polluted environments, climate change, biodiversity loss, health impacts, land grabbing, social injustice and so on, is no easy task. The personal impacts for activists and scientists of working on and fighting against these systemic problems are easily overlooked, and sadly some – such as our colleague Paul Baer who took his own life in 2016 – become terminally depressed.

Investigating how existential gloom and crisis arise for climate change activists and scientists and how they combat this, in both positive and negative ways, is the topic addressed by Hoggett and Randal. Psychosocial responses to climate change are seen as falling on a spectrum from engaging in the need for personal change and political engagement to denial of responsibility. Groups and organisations within the former range may intentionally and strategically work with emotions, e.g., suppressing pessimism, celebrating success. Those at the latter end of the spectrum dissociate and deny emotions. Hoggett and Randal interviewed six climate scientists and ten climate activists about the emotional impact of their work. They found that activists go through a series of : an exciting revelatory awakening to the issue, immersion in it, crisis (e.g., being overwhelmed, disillusioned, disempowered) leading to the need to rethink the meaning of their lives, and resolving personal issues (e.g., action as antidote to despair, finding a way to live with the knowledge they have obtained). The resolution may involve suppression of some basic facts, or even avoiding discussions about the topic of climate change, and the authors agree there is truth in Carter's (2015) suggestion that this is in order to avoid depression. Scientists are embedded in a set of institutions that divorce them from their emotions and which lead to a contradiction between their sense of social responsibility and their actions. Hence, amongst those interviewed, some of the scientists did not want to pay attention to their personal greenhouse gas emissions. This is most evident in the hypocrisy of the international jet-set lifestyles that most climate scientists and academics adopt. In contrast, the norms of activism are about taking responsibility and creating change. All the activists interviewed had moved to low-impact living.

The two communities also face very different personal challenges. Activists' most difficult experiences are police assault, raids, undercover infiltrations and court hearings. Scientists face public indifference to their work, frightening media attacks and conflict with their colleagues, especially if they are outspoken. They face 'anxious policymakers, predatory journalists and rivalrous colleagues' in an environment where feelings go unacknowledged, emotions are excluded, and rationality and logic promoted. Thus, Hoggett and Randall found climate scientists describing how: 'colleagues would bury themselves in the excitement and rewards of the work, denying that they had any responsibility beyond developing models or crunching numbers'. Those who do engage in

the public sphere tend to be excessively cautious, and this is noted to 'encourage collusion' and silence about the totally unrealistic 2°C policy target (see also Spash 2016). Amazingly, one of the interviewees stated that: 'some of the most senior figures in the field, including government chief scientists and oil-company CEOs, believe in private that the world is heading for a figure more like six degrees'.

Suppression of such information seems to be driven by the overwhelming desire for maintaining the capital-accumulating economy at all costs, even to the extent of claiming a 'new' growth economy is possible where material and energy throughput causes no harm (Spash 2014a). The *Better Growth, Better Climate* report reveals the true concern as being that, 'In the long term, if climate change is not tackled, growth itself will be at risk' (GCEC 2014: 9). In this respect the degrowth community might be expected to offer a more direct confrontation with systemic realities and the need for fundamental change.

Eversberg and Schmelzer turn their attention to who constitutes the degrowth movement and what are the different positions it contains. In fact their study is limited to a sample (N=814) of those attending the 2014 International Degrowth Conference held in Leipzig. This conference was an explicit attempt to move beyond the roots of degrowth in Southern Europe and France. That 84% of their respondents are German is, then, important in qualifying generalisation to a wider community.

The survey revealed core unity in the sample around the identification of economic growth as destructive, leading to the need to reduce material wealth in the Global North via democratic means involving female emancipation and non-violence. Using cluster analysis on (dis)agreement with twenty-nine statements they identify five groups: (C1) sufficiency-oriented critics of modernity, with an eco-radical aspect; (C2) techno-optimist reformers who think within existing structures and are sympathetic towards conservative politics, and weak personal practice; (C3) mostly German young female students, believing in a kind of classic liberal individual agency and pacifism; (C4) mostly German urban male traditional left wingers, holding a somewhat theoretical, techno-optimist position with a focus on redistribution; (C5) another left wing group, against capitalism and social domination and experimenting with alternative living. In terms of the overall sample, clusters C1, C3 and C5 were 22%-23% each, C2 19% and C4 13%.

The authors regard C5 as the most consistent with the degrowth ideal of mediating theory and practice through self-transformation. The differences amongst groups can also be quite stark: for example 45% of C1 wanted a ban on long-haul pleasure flights, whereas two-thirds of C2 were against this and exhibited frequent flying behaviour. Indeed, radical environmentalism appears generally less of a concern for the combined sample. The overall averages reported show 69% supporting long-haul flying for pleasure, 66% pro-technology and 54% against old lifestyles, 68% holding social inequity above climate

change, and 75% supporting individual consumer-based action (i.e. agency over structure). In addition, 34% did not want degrowth to be distanced from conservative thought. This seems to reveal that the German degrowth conference attracted a considerable non-radical element from the broad left and socially (not particularly environmentally) concerned youth. More generally, the findings support those of D'Amato et al. (2017) in terms of some class types. C2 respondents are clearly in line with their pragmatic evolutionists in terms of working with existing institutions, being against revolutionary change and becoming apologists for green growth, while C1 would be their radical revolutionaries. Their pragmatic revolutionaries are also noted to be motivated by a pacifist element, favouring incremental change but wanting a fundamental shift away from capitalism; some of the elements appearing in C3-C5 without the explicit leftist politics.

An issue is then the extent to which unity can be expected amongst such groups. Internationally the left has become divided and fractured, while social democratic parties have declined and lost elections in recent years to candidates backed by the extreme right, financial elites and corporate interests. Konik is concerned by the need to build a front against neoliberalism and how intellectual endeavours, that should be empowering, become siloed and unhelpful. More specifically the aim is to draw correspondences between the African ethical framework called 'Ubuntu' and ecofeminism. Ubuntu entails care for others and the environment as key to personal development. Three aspects are specifically emphasised. First is a common critique of the dichotomous thinking that leads to discrimination when one aspect is regarded as superior to the other. In patriarchal society this means men over women and nature, and in modernity the rational over the emotional. Colonialism meant the subjugation of Africans, belittling and eradicating their traditions and subsistence-oriented livelihoods. In contrast, both reason and emotion are recognised here as necessary for proper judgement. Second is the importance of care-giving relationships that emphasise interdependence and reciprocity rather than individuality and rivalrous consumption. This then entails linking to other community members (past, present and future) and fulfilling ethical obligations towards them. At the same time Konik notes the need for being able to critically judge traditional norms and values and especially those entailing injustice and discrimination. Third is the centring of self in community that entails ontological and epistemological understandings of what it is to be human and humane. In this respect African Ubuntu goes beyond the socialist goal of striving for the common good and concerns a person's place in the social, natural and cosmic order. This understanding of 'personhood in connection' is regarded as being exemplified by care-giving practice.

Overall, followers of Ubuntu and ecofeminists recognise that capitalism destroys a sense of community and nature, and sets itself against 'the life-affirming ethos that manifests in care-giving labour'. Yet there are also warnings

by Konik against those forms of socialism that are uncritical of productivism and technology. As shown by Eversberg and Schmelzer there are a range of positions on the left even amongst those aiming for societal transformation. What reading Konik suggests is that unification might be sought along ontological grounds, that is, through agreement over common aspects of social reality from the structure of patriarchy to the power relations inherent in (neoliberal) capitalism, and the need for supporting the institutions that promote alternative value systems.

Indeed, a common aspect running through the papers in this issue of *Environmental Values* is the social divisiveness and ecological destructiveness of the growth economy and the struggle for how to achieve transformation onto a more positive pathway. Along these lines the 2015 encyclical by Pope Francis has been seen as a wake-up call for Roman Catholics and a stimulus for all faith based groups to reconsider their position on the causes of global environmental problems. An interesting question is then how far such faith based groups have been more conservative and less critical compared with civil society groups. Glaab and Fuchs investigate thirty organisations representing these two groups (fifteen each) using a qualitative content analysis of their submissions to the United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20 or the Earth Summit 2012. This was the conference where the UN heavily pushed the Green Economy (Spash 2012). Glaab and Fuchs' findings show that the fifteen civil society groups are all supportive of the Green Economy and equated it with sustainable development, while the fifteen faith based groups have no coherent position, but include some organisations making more radical critiques. The civil society organisations include the African Wildlife Foundation, BioRegional Development Group, Fairtrade International, Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, Nature Conservancy and the World Wide Fund for Nature. They use the language of mainstream economics such as resource efficiency, natural capital, and ecosystem services, and 'do not challenge the structural conditions or reasons for unsustainable resource use'. They seek conservative, reformist approaches within existing institutions and justice within the existing economic system, e.g., access to markets and resources. In contrast, some faith based groups raise non-material dimensions of wellbeing and promote sufficiency. Glaab and Fuchs note that these ideas did not get addressed in the outcome document from the conference, which avoided words like 'moral' and 'ethics'. Instead, it promoted sustained and inclusive economic growth with a belief that the basic system requires only some reform at best.

One conclusion is that the more radical marginalised elements and the expression of a more general concern over ethics and justice are necessary counters to the narrow economic discourse in international negotiations. Of course the other side of this is that the majority in the international negotiating community conform to a hegemonic utopian vision of the capital accumulating

growth economy being sustainable, environmentally benign, inclusive and just. Therein lies the largest deception of the modern era.

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